The
Violet Knight
Vol.1
Yohna
Illustration by Ako Tenma

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The Violet Knight, Volume 1
Yohna

Translation by Charis Messier

Illustration by Ako Tenma

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Cross Infinite World
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www.crossinfworld.com

Published in the United States of America

First Digital Edition: September 2016

ISBN-10: 1-945341-01-7
ISBN-13: 978-1-945341-01-4

Nasette
Tita
Vivi
Luca
Ain
Yuki
Padi

N
W
E
S
Rvydom
Witch's Hut
Orphanage
Cele
Royal Capital
Adolunde
Fol
Royal Capital
Maruk
ARIDOL

Chapter 1

EVERYTHING started one fine spring Sunday afternoon just as the cherry blossom trees began to bloom. With only three more days until her university entrance ceremony, Yuki idly spent the rest of her spring break stretched out on the sofa, gazing absentmindedly through the window. Past the deck of her condominium on the fourteenth floor she could see the clear blue sky above Tokyo Tower.

Her mother, Nobuko, was cheerfully packing clothes in the dining room, which Yuki assumed was her putting away their winter clothing now that spring was here. Her father, Kaito, was reading his newspaper at the dining table as he sipped his coffee. Kaito's gray hair shimmered silver in the gentle sunlight shining through the windows.

It was a peaceful day. Yuki was oddly excited as feelings of curiosity and anxiety built over what awaited her in university. She hoped she could continue to relax until the entrance ceremony—there was a lot she had to fret over in the coming days.

Yuki looked nothing like a college student should. No matter how someone looked at her, they would only see a girl no older than ten, which was to be expected—she hadn't aged a day since she turned ten. Several months after her tenth birthday, Yuki noticed her hair hadn't grown at all. She reached her eighteenth birthday without growing another inch taller or gaining a single ounce.

Luckily, her parents didn't have a problem with her unique situation and often supported her, so she grew up without developing an inferiority complex.

She avoided curious eyes and rumors for most of her childhood thanks to attending an escalator school from preschool until high school. Everyone assumed her growth period ended early. However, university meant a massive increase in the number of people who didn't know her or her condition. That was one reason why she felt depressed on this fine spring day during her vacation.

"Nice weather we've got today," Kaito muttered to no one in particular, flipping the page of his newspaper.

"It really is," Nobuko chimed in cheerfully.

Nobuko and Kaito were a couple who always got along no matter how much time passed. Yuki took great pride in her parents' relationship.

“It’s the ideal weather. I’m glad we chose to do it today after all. Don’t you think so too, dear?”

“It really is.”

“Oh? Is something happening today?” Yuki asked. Her parents exchanged looks. Nobuko glared at Kaito with a dubious expression.

“You didn’t mention it to Yuki, Kai?”

He chuckled in embarrassment scratching his head, “Nah, well, you know how hard it is to find the right way to bring this kind of topic up, right? Remember the day I told you?”

“Good grief,” Nobuko admonished, puffing out her red cheeks.

Yuki had no idea what they were talking about. They almost seemed embarrassed.

“Fine, then. I thought it’d turn out this way. Yuki, dear, we have something important to discuss with you, so come here.”

Urged on by her mother to sit at the dining table, Yuki sat down, curious why her parents were being mysterious. She felt weird sitting at the table with her whole family when they weren’t eating.

“Yuki, have you ever thought there’s something weird about Kai when you look at him?” Nobuko asked, looking Yuki straight in the eyes with a curious expression.

Yuki assumed her mother finished packing, because her attention was focused on Yuki now. Yuki glanced at Kaito sitting opposite of her with a stern expression. He watched Yuki with stunning violet eyes.

“Something weird about Papa? Yeah, like his eye and hair color.”

“That’s right. Until now, we told you that Kai’s eye and hair color are caused by a genetic disorder and that you inherited the same disorder. We assured you there’s nothing strange about any of it.”

“So, what? Are you saying that’s not true?”

“Yes. You see, Kai is actually…from another world,” Nobuko confided.

Yuki froze for a full minute before releasing an over exaggerated sigh. “Oh, come on. Another joke? I’m going to be a college student soon, you know? You can’t trick me anymore.”

“I’m sorry. I wish it was a joke, but it’s not, so we can’t joke about it.”

“Huh? What? Is it a joke or not?” Yuki asked, confused.

“Yuki, the reason you’ve been so listless lately is because of your body, right?”

“……”

“See, I knew it,” Nobuko said to Kaito.

“Sorry about that, Yuki. I didn’t notice until Nobuko mentioned it to me,” Kaito apologized.

“So I discussed it with Kai. And he said, ‘Maybe she’s more suited to that world and that’s why she can’t age in this world.’ You know

how children with parents from different countries end up more like one ethnicity than the other, right? Like how you can have a child who ends up looking more Japanese or more American. So we thought maybe it's that way for children with parents from different worlds too," Nobuko explained.

"…Huh?" Yuki was confused. They were basically saying she couldn't age because she wasn't suited to Earth. It's not like she could casually reply, "Is that so?" after hearing her mother's convoluted explanation. But Nobuko fervently rattled on without noticing the dumbfounded Yuki.

"That's why I'm super, incredibly pained and saddened by this decision," her parents glanced at each other before staring at Yuki, "after a great deal of discussion I decided we should send you to his world. And do it today."

"Haah," Yuki rolled her eyes.

"I'm certain you'll become a beautiful and grown woman if you go to that world, Yuki. You're my and Kai's daughter after all. It's only obvious. You'll definitely enrapture men with those eyes you've inherited from Kai." Nobuko winked. Kaito nodded beside her.

"Okay, here's your luggage. I packed for you. You're terrible at packing, right? For the time being I put food, clothes, and supplies that will help you survive wherever you end up." Nobuko held out Yuki's favorite white with red polka dots backpack—it was bursting at the seams.

"Oh, right. Take this too for protection. Think of it as a kind of protective charm." Kaito pulled a tubular case from somewhere. "It's an archery set. I bought you a new one. Be sure to keep it with you."

Nobuko strapped the backpack around Yuki's chest and stomach instead of her back. She wasn't sure what was inside, but it was heavy and awkward hanging from her chest. Something was strapped onto her back next.

"This is a parachute. Make sure to use it if you end up falling from midair."

"Huh? Midair?"

"Listen up, okay? Be sure not to follow any suspicious people anywhere. Even if they offer you food. Also, I'd be worried about the water, so if it doesn't taste right, make sure you distill or filter it first."

Kaito bent down to eye-level with Yuki who was wearily listening to Nobuko's lecture. He peered into her eyes before finally speaking.

"That world may still be dangerous. So Yuki, if you happen to manifest powers, you mustn't use them indiscriminately in front of others. Promise me you won't."

"Powers? I have no idea what you're going on about. Come on,

guys, aren't you taking this joke a little too far?"

"Take this seriously. You'll probably be able to communicate with the locals, and the food isn't half-bad there either. They aren't modernized or technologically advanced like Earth, so I'm sure there's a lot of stuff you'll have a hard time with. Also, they have no weapon laws like Japan, so it's normal for people to have a weapon on them. Be careful."

"What's with that? It sounds dangerous! I mean, what fantasy story did you pull this from?"

Kaito forced a smile and wrapped his hands behind Yuki's neck.

"Come now, I understand you don't believe us Yuki, but listen closely. For your own good. This is the only thing I brought with me from there. Use it if you're ever in any trouble. Never let it leave your side. Treat it like it's a part of your body." Kaito clasped a chain around Yuki's neck. A ring dangled from the chain.

"Aah, geez, just how much effort are you guys putting into this? It's not even April Fool's Day."

"Why are you so impatient, Yuki? I guess you get that from Nobuko. Ah, right, let me tell you my name in that world as well, just in case. It's Leuco Cahn—"

"You don't have to go as far as thinking up a fake name."

"…It's not a fake name, though."

"All right, time to jump," Kaito said after he and Nobuko finished getting Yuki geared up for her trip, while she stared on in blank amazement at how far her parents were taking their joke.

"Huuh?"

"Like I said, time to jump from the balcony," he said like he was explaining to a young child. Yuki looked from the balcony to Kaito.

"Yeah, but this is the fourteenth floor? Where do you want me to jump from? Are you trying to kill me?"

"I'm not. I fell from a precipitous cliff into the ocean. So falling from high places has to be the way between worlds. Not that I'd ever want to do it again," Kaito said with a mischievous smirk. He hugged her tightly.

"I hate having to put you through the same thing, but I want you to find happiness as the beautiful young lady you are meant to be, instead of trapped as you are."

Before she knew it, Yuki was stuck in a hug between Kaito and Nobuko.

"I wish our family could be together forever, but I shouldn't say something so selfish," Nobuko said stepping away. Kaito scooped Yuki up.

"Hey! Wai—Papa! Wait a minute!"

"No, I won't wait. My resolve will shatter."

The inside of the room gradually moved away as Kaito carried her. Nobuko must have opened the balcony glass door, because Yuki heard the rattle of the door sliding open. A cool spring breeze blew into the room. Buildings surrounded every angle, and she could no longer see Tokyo Tower.

“Stop it. I’m scared. It’s impossible. I’ll die from this height!” Yuki protested.

“You’ll be fine. You’re our child. You won’t die, Yuki. Upsy-daisy.” Kaito sat Yuki on the edge of the balcony’s stone rail.

Terror shot through Yuki at the drop to the alley below as she was held firmly on the balcony’s railing. Their condo was positioned in such a way no one could see their balcony, not even from the building across the street. All anyone would notice is a body when it splattered against the road below.

If I had a bigger body, I would have been too heavy for him to carry, Yuki thought grudgingly. She desperately clung to Kaito’s neck to keep from falling.

“See ya, Yuki.”

“Don’t…”

“Have a safe trip,” said both Kaito and Nobuko as they pried her hands off his neck and lightly pushed her shoulders.

Her body fell off the rail. She stared up at the clear sky as the roar of wind ripped past her ears.

I never imagined I would die this way. I thought it was a joke. Have my parents finally given up on me because of my inability to age? Are they trying to be rid of me for good? Many thoughts raced through her mind and disappeared in a whirlwind of emotions. Before long, everything turned black.

Chapter 2

STRUGGLING to breathe, Yuki opened her eyes to a blurry world.

I'm…alive? Yuki's eyes burned, forcing an absent awareness she was underwater. The instant her brain registered she was underwater she struggled to breathe. She desperately tried to swim to the surface, but the movement forced all the air from her body. Panicking further as her mind grew hazy—she struggled with her last bit of energy to reach the water's surface.

Just when she thought she could stick her face out of the water, her body slowly sank. She frantically kicked her legs and swung her arms, but the surface only drifted farther away. She racked her hazy mind for what was weighing her down, when she realized how heavy the backpack she had on was, and quickly pulled it off. She untangled the parachute and removed it too. She was at her limit. She wanted to breathe so badly, she couldn't think about anything else.

Her body lightened the instant the backpack and parachute came off. She swam straight for the surface. Her body's natural impulse to suck in air caused her lungs to expand, sucking in water and pushing out what little oxygen was left. Yuki lost consciousness as her right hand finally breached the surface.

***

***SOMEONE** is smacking my cheeks. Is it already morning?* Yuki thought, shaking her head. Her mother, Nobuko, always fooled around when waking her up. Yuki was just as often irritable after her mother woke her in such an annoying manner. She rolled over to escape the annoying hand.

"Mnn…"

"Don't sleep," said a deep voice.

She found it odd an unfamiliar voice was trying to wake her up. The voice continued to speak, "I thought you lost consciousness. I guess the joke's on me because you're just sleeping," the voice mocked. Yuki opened her eyes to see a soaked young man sitting beside her.

Yuki didn't scream as she quickly sat up and backed away.

“You’re awake now?” the young man asked curtly. “Is this your stuff?”

He held up her archery set. Yuki nodded.

“Ooh…so you can use a bow?” he must have checked inside the case.

A handsome young man with blond hair, almond-shaped blue eyes, and an aquiline nose was sitting in front of her. Yuki was astonished by how incredibly handsome the young man was, even as he squinted against the dazzlingly bright sunlight.

He looked like he was in his early twenties. She was further surprised by the plate armor and helmet scattered around him. It looked like the armor shown in Hollywood movies. She stared flabbergasted at the handsome blond man from where she sat on the ground.

“So do you care to tell me why you were drowning in a place like this? This area is off-limits to ordinary people—” he said, suspicion clouding his visage.

Their eyes suddenly met. He stared at her with such intensity she thought his eyes would burn a hole right through her. Her mind spun to catch up to the situation.

Where am I? Why am I here in the first place? Wait, wasn’t I pushed off our condo’s balcony? Hold on, was I drowning? And then this person saved me? Weird, how did he save me then? CPR? This guy who looks like a Hollywood Star gave me CPR?

No way that’s possible. But wait, why am I even here? Don’t tell me Mama and Papa went through the effort of making their joke so real they laid out a cushion or trampoline to catch me when I fell? And then they carried me here to further their joke after I lost consciousness? Is that what happened?

Yuki forced herself to accept her stretch of a conclusion over what happened; at least for the moment to push her confusion back enough to talk to the handsome man gaping at her.

“U-Um, where am I? We’re still somewhere in Japan, right?”

“Japan?” the handsome man frowned.

Handsome guys are handsome no matter what they do, Yuki thought, impressed by how he could still be handsome after scrunching his face.

“I’ve never heard of a place by that name. I don’t believe there’s anywhere by that name near or within Rvydom or Maruk, either.”

“…Huh?”

Japan doesn’t exist? This isn’t a continuation of my parents’ bad joke, is it? Yuki’s head started to spin. She took in her surroundings. She couldn’t deny that the vast expanse of breathtaking scenery was too real and large for a private set. If she was still in Tokyo, there would

be buildings in the distance at least.

The handsome man nimbly put his armor back on and gently covered the stunned Yuki with his cloak.

"Come now, young lady. You are inviting a cold by remaining in those soaked clothes. I will have a change of clothes prepared for you, so come with me."

"Huh? O-Oh, okay. Thank you very…much."

She took his outstretched hand and followed him at a hurried gait.

***

APPARENTLY Yuki fell into a spring near a castle. The castle looked like one found in Europe, and certainly not anywhere in Japan. The architecture itself was entirely different from Japanese architecture.

The handsome man entered the front gates without slowing. The armored guards didn't stop him. Yuki's face was hidden by under his cloak, so she couldn't see too well. Several people asked him who she was, to which he merely answered, "A guest," and continued walking without further questioning.

Is he actually someone of a high rank? Everyone who spoke to the handsome man acted deferential, showing a level of courtesy beyond even Japan's formality standards.

What if he's something like a prince? Now wouldn't that feel like I just stepped into a novel? Yuki laughed quietly to herself.

***

HOW long had he been pulling her by the hand for? They had passed a multitude of servants in odd clothing, guards decked out in armor, and that was just the people. Paintings of battles and foreign scenery, banners with odd designs, and architecture she had only ever seen in western buildings all fought for her attention as she peeked out of her cloak at what they were walking by.

By the time she realized how far they had traveled down the winding corridors, Yuki was led into a spacious room surrounded by several servants who silently moved to strip her clothing. She was so startled by their actions—especially when they started dressing her in a light-blue frilly dress—that she was left in an unresisting daze.

"You look splendid in this dress," one of the servants praised, the rest nodding in satisfaction.

Yuki didn't have long to consider the whole being stripped and dressed by strangers incident before someone knocked on the door.

She turned around to see the handsome young man from earlier standing in the doorway.

"My, Prince Luca. Look at this lovely young lady. Is she not the most adorable little girl you have ever seen?" asked the oldest servant.

Prince…Luca? *So he really was a Prince and someone of rank*. Yuki hesitantly peered up at him. She fidgeted, as he silently looked her over. The maids filed out of the room, the oldest whispering something in Luca's ear before she left.

Luca nodded as if confirming something before turning to Yuki, "I'm sorry, but I had the clothes you were wearing disposed of. They were soaked and oddly conspicuous. In return, I will supply you with as much clothing as you like."

"Huh? Th-Thanks." Embarrassed, Yuki cast down her eyes. He gently lifted her chin. Due to their height difference, Luca bent down so his face was closer to hers.

H-He lifted my chin! The man the servants called a prince just did something very prince-like by Yuki's standards, causing her to panic and avert her eyes.

"…You are…"

"Please excuse me!"

The door burst open. The hand propping Yuki's chin up quickly pulled away with the sound of the door. Shocked, she glanced toward the door where a slender young man with indigo blue hair and black eyes stood. His face was stiff.

"Prince Orga has summoned you. What exactly did you do this time around?"

Luca sighed. "Brother has sharper ears than I thought."

The other young man spotted Yuki and glared at her. "What is with this child? Since when did you pick up such a profligate hobby?"

"Just now. It appears Brother has taken an interest in her too," Luca answered nonchalantly.

The young man with indigo hair sighed at Yuki who was flustered over not having a clue about what was going on.

"Right, I haven't asked for your name yet," Luca said to Yuki with the finest smile.

Wow. Yuki was perplexed by the stunning smile she never imagined he could make after how curt he was when they first met.

"My name is Luca. And you are?"

"Y-Yuki."

"Yuki, eh? What a strange name. Where is your home?" Luca crouched until his eyes were level with hers.

He's treating me like a child, Yuki thought, but she was relieved by how friendly he treated her because of it.

"I don't know where my home is. Before I knew it, I was where

you found me."

Beautiful blue eyes the color of the shallow coral oceans off Hawaii's coast were gazing at Yuki.

Ah, these are the eyes of someone trying to determine whether I'm lying or not. It's unpleasant he's looking at me this way, but I guess it's inevitable for him not to trust someone saying something that sounds made up. Yuki sighed internally.

"Prince Luca," the other young man cautioned.

"I'll go now." Luca stood and offered his hand to Yuki. "Now then, shall we go meet a scary man?"

Clueless about everything, Yuki nodded—contemplating whether she just encountered someone with a split personality.

Chapter 3

THIRTY minutes of walking through the massive castle brought them in front of a grand chamber entrance with heavily armored guards on each side and unfamiliar flags hanging above them. The flag was designed around the same flaming red dragon that loomed on Luca's armor and cloak.

Perplexed by the constantly changing scenery, Yuki restlessly glanced around for something to ground her when the hand leading her gave a little squeeze. She looked up at the comforting smile Luca directed at her as he leaned over to whisper in her ear.

"If you value your life, don't say a word. Keep quiet," Luca said, cool-headed.

Yuki raised an eyebrow. *That's not something you should say with a smile. At any rate, I don't know what's going to happen to me*.

She nodded with a serious expression. Satisfied by her response, Luca faced forward.

As though he were waiting for Luca to finish, a well-groomed soldier announced, "Enter."

The imposing door like none she had seen before opened silently on oiled hinges.

***

INSIDE the massive throne room was an air of sacred authority. Shaking off her discomfort, Yuki spotted another handsome man with black hair and eyes opulently seated on a throne. He looked like he was in his late twenties and entirely indifferent to the world around him.

Luca dropped to one knee and bowed his head. Yuki followed suit, and bowed her head. The man with black hair gazed at Yuki from where he sat with an air of absolute authority.

"This is the girl?"

Thinking he was referring to her, Yuki looked up and was met by a derisive smile. His lips were smiling, but his glare was piercing. His gaze was so unpleasant Yuki defiantly stared back at him.

"Yes, I found her covered in blood wandering in a daze through

one of the battlefields I happened across. Thus, I took her under my care."

Huh? Battlefield? Covered in blood?

Confused by the explanation of events she didn't remember being involved in, Yuki reminded herself of what Luca warned her earlier and stared back at the man's cruel gaze without saying anything.

"Heh. I heard a slightly different take on her story though. I heard the girl came out of the spring. Hence why she was soaked."

"She was soaked because she was so terribly covered in blood I had her purified in the spring. Her clothing was bloodstained, so I disposed of it. I could not allow a person so dirtied to stand in your presence."

"I see… Sounds like you had a rough time." The words of pity that should have been for comforting Yuki sounded hallow. The black haired man, Orga, idly grasped at the air. "…Ah, right, right. I forgot. Luca, about your next assignment…"

Luca jerked beside her.

"I was thinking about having you go to Fol. You're about the only person who could get things under control there. You'll go there for me, won't you?"

"…Yes," Luca complied.

"I'll prepare the troops so they will be ready for your departure tomorrow morning."

"I am greatly obliged by…your high favor of me."

"Oh, right," Orga continued with an even colder gaze, his previous stoicism all but consumed in disgust, "I will do more than just take good care of your cute little guest. She's one of Rvydom's lost children. I'll make sure she's treated appropriately."

"Brother! That is—"

"Luca. Should you be devoting yourself to a child?"

"…No." Luca's head was still bowed, but Yuki saw the terribly frightening expression on his face.

"All right, then. My business with you is over. My next audience is waiting. Leave."

"…Please…excuse us." Luca swiped his cloak behind him and gallantly left the room. Yuki dashed to keep up with him. She looked over her shoulder for a mere moment, but it was enough to see eyes filled with hatred staring at her.

***

"THAT sadistic scoundrel…" Luca's face contorted before the door shut behind him. However, when he glanced at Yuki worriedly peering up at him, his expression did a 180 into a mischievous smirk.

“Ryvdom’s lost child…huh?”

“Prince Luca!” The young man with indigo hair appeared from another doorway.

“Ah, Ain, sorry for making you worry,” Luca said.

“You should be. My stomach was turning on the other side of the curtain.”

“From just that?” Luca laughed.

The two of them turned their attention on Yuki.

“Now then…why don’t we ask this young lady what really happened. What’s the state of her guest room?”

“I already had it prepared.”

“I see,” Luca nodded, turning to Yuki with a sullen expression, “I won’t do anything bad to you. I can promise you that much.”

Yuki felt she could trust this expression more than any fake smile.

***

YUKI was led back to the room where the servants dressed her. Several servants were already in the room that smelled of black tea. She sat on the comfortable sofa, when one of the servants gave her a cup of tea and the rest immediately cleared the room. Luca sat in the sofa facing hers, and the young man with indigo hair—Ain—stood behind him.

“Now then, as I said earlier, I have no plans to do anything to you. As long as there aren’t any problems, I won’t let anything bad happen to you.”

Yuki nodded.

“So why exactly were you drowning in the spring? I was there the whole time, you know?”

“Prince Luca,” Ain quietly admonished.

Luca responded with a dry smile. “That spring isn’t connected to any other water sources, even underground. Meaning you shouldn’t be able to drown there unless you step in from the surrounding shore. But I didn’t see you go in the water. Can you explain why?”

“I don’t know why.”

Ain and Luca’s expressions clouded.

“I’m sorry. But I really don’t know. When I came to, I was drowning in the spring.”

“…What did you say the name of your country was?”

“Japan. I live in a city known as Tokyo,” Yuki answered, thoroughly depressed. She knew she was somewhere incredibly far from home.

I’m sure this is the world Papa came from.

“I said this earlier too, but I don’t know of any such country. I don’t remember hearing of a city by that name either.”

He wouldn’t know it if this isn’t Earth.

“Also, I want to ask you if everyone in this *Japan* of yours has the same eyes?”

“What? Eyes?”

“Yes. Does everyone have violet colored eyes?”

Yuki’s violet eyes—violet eyes that caused people to look at her with a mixture of curiosity, awe, and fear.

“No, they don’t. In my country, everyone has the same black hair and eyes as your rotten older brother. Well, not everyone is as malicious as him though.”

Luca’s expression softened. Yuki was infuriated when she remembered Orga’s attitude. “I mean the way he speaks is repulsive. What was with that whole, ‘You’ll go there for me, won’t you?’ crap? Isn’t he some big shot? If he tells you to do it, you can’t complain. The way he said it is repulsive.”

“Hmph,” Yuki huffed, her rage cooling. “…Only Papa, my father…and I have violet eyes.”

Violet eyes stood out particularly bad in Japan, where more than ninety-nine percent of the population has black eyes, but Yuki knew there weren’t many people with violet eyes on Earth—if any.

“I see…then it’s not a secret country created by the people of Rvydom,” Luca commented.

“Hey, what’s Rvydom?”

Someone sighed. It wasn’t Luca, but Ain who was standing behind him. “This girl does not even know of Rvydom? I’m speechless.”

“Not like I can help it! I don’t know what I don’t know!”

“Rvydom is one of this world’s countries. I’ll explain. Just let me know whether I cover anything you already know,” Luca said, sipping his tea.

“This continent consists of three countries: Rvydom, Maruk, and this country—Adolunde. Get me a map,” Luca said. Ain quickly laid a map on the table. The map showed a continent similar in shape to Australia.

“The western half is Adolunde. The country to the north of the mountain range is Rvydom. To the east of the mountain range is Maruk.”

The three countries were cleanly divided by a titanic mountain range. Rvydom was slightly smaller than the other two, with the mountain range cutting more into its territory.

“The world was at peace while these three countries kept the equilibrium.”

"…While they kept it? It's not anymore?"

"You're smart," Luca smiled. "Rvydom was destroyed—at the hands of a five-year war."

Ain and Luca's expressions soured. "Rvydom is now under Maruk's control."

"I see…"

Yuki recalled how Kaito told her, "That world might still be dangerous."

Maybe the war was what he was referring to.

"And now Maruk is waging war with Adolunde. Eight years ago they started the war, and it continued for three years until both countries exhausted their people and resources. They formed a ceasefire pact, which has lasted for five years. The pact has been lifted, dropping this world into the flames of war once again."

"I…see," Yuki listened in an absent daze. "I want to go home."

She gasped the moment she muttered the words. Yuki's parents pushed her off their condo's balcony. She was confused and maybe a little angry, but mostly just at a loss for why.

Maybe they hated it after all—perhaps they hated and were ashamed of their daughter who stopped aging since she was ten. Their happiness might have just been a pretense. They might have been suffering without letting her see. And maybe they were so distraught after eight years their only option was to push her to her death.

"Haha," she laughed dryly. "…I guess I don't have a home to return to."

"Yuki." Startled, Yuki looked at Luca sitting across from her. "You can stay here if you have no home to return to. My Brother said so too."

"…Is that okay?"

Was it really okay to let someone like Yuki—who they knew nothing about—stay in their castle? Their world was currently at war. A world at war must have far too many problems to spare the time to deal with one girl.

But I don't want to be under that rotten older brother's loving care.

"Hey, aren't you going somewhere tomorrow? Can't I come with you?"

Luca and Ain appeared dumbfounded by her question.

"To Fol? Fol is a battlefield right now. I can't take a child to such a place. I'm going there to fight; death is always a companion on the battlefield."

"A battlefield! You were ordered to go there?"

"I'm a soldier after all. It's only natural for me to go. I can understand your wariness toward my Brother, but I don't think he'll kill you. If you're still unsatisfied with that, I'll leave behind someone

I trust."

"You know a lot about your rotten brother, huh? You guys on good terms?"

Ain's face stiffened and Luca looked like he just got hit by a peashooter, before his expression shifted to a defiant smirk. "Yeah, I'm well-informed on him. Brother wants me—yes, he hates me enough to want to kill me. He'll readily kill me if I don't keep my guard up."

"Kill…"

"You were picked up by me—the man he wants to kill. Well, you best be prepared for what that means."

I'm being granted a place to live and I'll likely be given food, even though they don't know who I am—and my life might be in danger. Have I come to a ridiculous world or what? Yuki thought in blank amazement.

Chapter 4

THE next day Yuki woke up to eat a fancy breakfast alone in her room, after which she crawled back into the plush bed she was granted to doze off into a relaxed sleep. A while later, the servants woke her and dressed her with the same professionalism as the previous day. She was dressed in a slightly fancier dress this time.

"The dress is a present from Prince Luca," is all that the head servant said before leaving with her emptied plates.

"This dress is more like a gown than a dress."

The maids had dressed Yuki in a pale-pink dress with a long skirt and dangling sleeves. The dress would have looked better with high heels, but Yuki was most likely mistaken for the same age as her appearance as she was given red heelless shoes to wear instead.

I would normally never wear this kind of clothing, she thought spinning in front of the mirror. The door opened at the same time as someone knocked.

"Excuse me. Is Yuki here?" Ain violently shoved the door open. Yuki was startled to see Ain flustered.

"Ain?"

"Ah, Yuki, where is your luggage?" Ain asked in a rush when he spotted her standing in front of the mirror.

"Huh?"

"The items you brought with you."

Luggage? Items? Yuki pondered for a moment before remembering.

"Now that I think about it, I tossed it away in the spring. All I have on me is the archery set you see over there."

"This is all you have?" Ain briskly walked into the room and grabbed the black tubular case.

"That's right," Yuki nodded.

Ain walked over to Yuki and grabbed her arm. "They are having the send-off ceremony for Prince Luca, so we need to hurry." At her look of confusion, he added, "You are coming with me."

"H-Huh? Why?"

"I do not know why either. Prince Luca ordered me to bring you. He sure knows how to make people run around."

Yuki had no idea what was going on, and was full of questions,

but Ain merely muttered complaints to himself without telling her anything.

***

YUKI stepped out onto the balcony overlooking the first-floor hall teeming with people donned in full plate armor, their helmets held ceremoniously in hand. She stared at the surreal scene in amazement, until she spotted a blond youth at the vanguard. He was the only one clad in a red and white cloak—it was Luca. Ain led her by the wrist to a landing in the stairs where if she went down another flight, she would be on the same floor as the armor-clad soldiers.

"Hi there. I see you came."

Yuki turned at the familiar voice. Orga was sitting leisurely in a chair setup in the center of the landing.

"U-Um—" Yuki looked up at Ain to ask him what was going on, but he had let go of her wrist and was standing behind her.

"Stand straight," he mouthed.

What the heck is going on!

Yuki did as she was told and stood straight, gazing at the sight in front of her. A veritable army of armor-clad soldiers filled the grand dome-like room. Servants moved around in the back, while a soft chatter was maintained throughout the room. Luca stood in front of a group of soldiers who seemed to be squad leaders—at least that's what she thought after comparing their extra adornments with the other soldiers.

"So? What business do you have with this girl, Luca?"

Luca glanced briefly at Yuki before facing Orga.

"I was planning on taking her—Yuki—to Fol with me," he said in a loud enough voice to cut through the soft chatter filling the hall.

"…I told you I would care for her and treat her appropriately, did I not? Do you have so little faith in me?"

"No, I trust you, Brother. However—" Luca stopped talking and faced Yuki.

He signaled with his eyes for her to come to the center of the landing.

What does he want?

The men behind Luca started to murmur. Yuki walked in front of Orga to the edge of the landing where the stairs descended from. Luca climbed the steps, halting just a few steps below where Yuki stood. He removed the sword from his waist and knelt in front of Yuki.

The murmur grew louder through the hall but didn't reach Yuki's ears. She was merely staring into those blue eyes, unsure of anything.

"Take this." Luca pulled a gold token the size of Yuki's fist from

his pocket and handed it to her; it looked like an oversized coin. He whispered, “Hold it in your left hand.”

She took it into her left hand. Next, Luca bowed his head and declared, “I, Cendol Lucat Adolunde, swear that as long as there is still air in these lungs I will follow you and protect you until the end. I shall put my words of loyalty into action, by receiving this proof of our bond.”

“Huh?”

“Take the sword,” Luca said lifting his face. He held out the hilt of his sword to her. “Unsheathe the sword, and tap my shoulder with the flat side of the blade.”

“Huh? What?”

“Hurry up.”

Yuki unsheathed the sword and lightly tapped Luca’s left shoulder with the flat side of the blade. Following which, the gold token in her left hand started glowing. A violet light spread through the area.

“Wh-What?”

The light was so bright she couldn’t keep her eyes open. She looked away from the glowing token to Luca who was wrapped in the light as well. A few seconds passed before the light disappeared, leaving the area in silence as if it never occurred.

“What was that…?” Yuki absently muttered.

Luca stood as though nothing important happened, and took his sword and the gold token back from her. He readjusted his clothing and hair, climbed the last few steps, and stood beside Yuki.

“Brother.”

Orga was expressionless to the point Yuki couldn’t tell what he was thinking. However, the aura emanating from him was malevolent enough.

“I trust you, Brother, but it is a Knight’s duty to protect his Master.”

“That’s…true. But you know what that means, don’t you?”

“Yes, I did it with that in mind,” Luca said, placing his hand on Yuki’s shoulder. Out of the corner of her eye, Yuki saw Ain’s deathly pale face.

Master? What does that mean?

The surrounding people murmured, Orga looked disappointed, Luca smirked sadistically, and Ain was in shock. Only Yuki stood there confused. She suddenly felt something off about her right hand’s middle finger—an unfamiliar silver ring tinged violet now rested there.

Chapter 5

THE carriage shook, rattling as it bounced down a road that looked more like a dirt path to Yuki. How long had it been since the castle disappeared into the distance? The sun had drawn an arc through the sky and was slowly descending on the other side.

Yuki asked Ain many questions as they rode in the carriage together. The more she heard from him, the more she learned she was in a completely different world from Earth and was currently in an outrageous position. The castle she slept in was Adolunde's castle and the main castle in the royal capital.

Orga, the man Yuki dubbed as the *Rotten Older Brother*, was the first prince and the successor to Adolunde's throne. Supposedly, Adolunde was already under his authority. And Luca, Orga's younger brother, was the fourth prince of Adolunde. Ain told Yuki she had become the *Master* of Luca, the Fourth Prince of Adolunde.

Their whole Knight System is ridiculous.

The *Order of Knights* existed throughout all the countries of Aridol and was self-governed. From how Ain explained it to Yuki, the Order granted what was like a license to be a Knight, and the Order bestowed a rank on its Knights. In order to be knighted, the Knight hopeful must first take the test in their home country, which will grant them knighthood in the Order upon passing marks. A Knight could choose only one master to serve at a time. The Knights who didn't choose a master often served as soldiers; the cost being they wouldn't receive a *Favor*.

What's with this whole Favor thing anyway?

Knights with a Master receive *Favor* from their contractual bond. The *Favor* takes form as developing the ability to heal and strengthening the Knight's abilities. When Yuki heard Ain's explanation, she shouted, "What is that! Magic?"

The proof of the contract bond between Knight and Master are the Contract Rings, which magically appear on their fingers.

…It's all too surreal. I suddenly find myself in a strange place, and then when I think someone without any hidden agendas has taken me in, I'm forced to make a weird contract with them. Then I find out the person I made a contract with is actually a prince of high rank, and he lets me stay in his castle, before warning me his psychotic brother wants him dead. No

matter what anyone says, I don't feel blessed or grateful for any of that.

Yuki's head was spinning with the last words Ain said before leaving the carriage, "Well, I think it is best if you don't let it get to you. Knowing that man, he probably made the contract with you out of spite toward Prince Orga. I mean, Prince Orga called you one of Rvydom's Lost Children. You are his new toy. I am sure he just didn't want you to be snatched away by his brother."

"What does he mean by…toy?"

All the soldiers were traveling by horse. Yuki didn't know how to ride a horse, so she rode with her luggage by horse-drawn carriage at the back of the troops accompanied by the supply carts. Yuki had seen the supply train following behind her carriage; she thought it was small compared to the number of soldiers traveling with them. She dismissed it as something beyond her knowledge or care.

Yuki was left alone in the carriage after Ain left to sit beside the coachman. She removed the archery case hanging from her shoulder and squeezed it in her lap, sighing.

"I don't get it."

She couldn't even begin to imagine what the deal was with those strange brothers on bad terms, the state of the world she found herself in, or what was awaiting her on the battlefield she was headed for.

"What's going to happen to me?"

She flopped onto the luggage and shut her eyes. She must have been exhausted from everything, because her mind quickly faded into oblivion.

***

THE journey from Adolunde Castle to Fol normally took a little less than a week. Ain held his hand to his head.

"Aaah, good grief, why do powerful people like their sick games! I can't comprehend it!"

The coachman forced a smile.

"We're headed to a bloody battlefield, but we were only allowed to bring the bare minimum in supplies. We were ordered not to procure our supplies from the local area, but to wait for more supply carts to be dispatched from the capital. Doesn't that mean we'll die in vain if Prince Orga's sick whims keep him from sending us supplies? Uggh, no matter how I calculate our supplies, there won't be enough," Ain complained, holding his head as he looked at his notes.

Ain was a civil officer assigned to serve Luca. One other person was assigned as Luca's military officer. The three of them had been together since childhood. The time they had spent together was very long. However—

"I still haven't a clue what he's thinking…"

In the first place, where did he find the violet-eyed girl—Yuki? And why did he bring her this far?

"He's left me completely in charge of caring for her too."

Fortunately, Yuki was a smart girl who listened to him without kicking up a fuss, but she was far too ignorant of the world. Even if she was feigning ignorance, Ain had a hard time doubting her when she didn't even know what he considered common sense. But it would be a different story if she was a *Witch*.

"Ugh, great, now I'm starting to doubt myself." Ain wanted to criticize and blame the prince who was the source of the worries frying Ain's overworked mind.

"Now, now," the coachman soothed.

A messenger ran to their carriage cutting Ain's complaints short. "Prince Luca has ordered a short break and rest for the horses and men." The messenger turned to Ain, "Oh, and Prince Luca has summoned you, Ain."

Please don't let him tell me anything more annoying than he already has, Ain prayed.

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BY the time Ain arrived where Luca was, he found him absently staring at the ring on his middle finger.

"Prince Luca, you summoned me?" Ain asked.

"About Fol… I received word that Maruk's army has already taken control of the castle and is asserting its presence over the area. One of their generals has taken residence in the castle," Luca answered with a sour look.

Ain was shocked by the news—he just obtained the information himself.

Where did he learn the news from so fast again?

"Yes, I heard the same information," Ain nodded solemnly, keeping up the pretense of being calm.

"I'm sure my Brother has heard as well. Brother most likely knew Fol would fall into Maruk's hands. He wanted to send me here because it fell. No matter how we fight back, we won't win without massive casualties. If anything, this will end in failure and a disgrace. And if I take one wrong step, it will lead to my death. How to handle this one?" Luca pondered, staring emptily at the sky.

"Um," Ain interjected, "What do you plan on doing with the girl? I suppose you brought her to spite Prince Orga?"

Luca didn't answer.

"Whatever the circumstance may be, I don't think it was wise to

go as far as forming a contractual bond with her. You don't know who she really is. She might be…" Ain shut his mouth and fell silent. Should he tell his master that his actions may have been very foolish?

"She might be a Witch. Right?" Luca smirked sadistically. Ain held his tongue.

How does he always know what I'm going to say?

"Because what you're thinking shows on your face. At this rate, you'll never become a tactician."

Shocked, Ain looked up at a chuckling Luca.

"She's not a Witch. Annie told me she didn't have a Seal anywhere on her body."

Annie was the head of servants who had tended to Luca and Ain since they were children.

"Is that so? That's good then," Ain sighed with relief.

A Seal would appear on a Witch's body depending on the extent of their ability. Witches were born with the Seal, so you could safely assume someone without a Seal was a normal human.

"Might have been just as good if she had been a witch," Luca muttered.

What would be good about that? Ain couldn't understand it at all.

"Good grief. Please tell me, even if indirectly, if you have a plan. You should think more seriously about your position."

"Yeah, sorry about that. Where's Yuki?"

"She seemed exhausted. She is asleep."

Ain was beyond exasperated when he found her sleeping on top of her luggage without an ounce of nervousness.

Luca chuckled quietly, "Bring her to me when we arrive at the town."

"As you command," Ain said.

"Ready the troops to move out," Luca said.

Chapter 6

WITH the City of Fol just a short distance ahead, Luca ordered the army to begin preparations for a siege. None of that mattered to Yuki though; she found herself utterly stunned by the outrageous fantasy-like things the man in front of her said.

"…What's a Witch?" Yuki asked, not following the conversation.

The handsome young man with blond hair who spouted the fantasy info-dump—Luca—sat leisurely in his chair staring at Yuki with a brooding air. She had no idea what he was thinking.

Yuki had worn nothing but pale dresses during their trip, until she was suddenly told to wear a shabby gray patchwork mantle over a richly colored dress.

"Hey, say something. You made me wear these weird clothes. What's going on?"

"Witches like to wear that kind of clothing. Keeping up appearances is important," Luca replied shortly.

"What's a Witch, anyway? Shouldn't you start by telling me about that?"

Luca sighed as if answering her question was a nuisance. Ain quickly offered an explanation from where he stood beside her.

"I see you do not know about Witches either, Yuki. Make sure you listen carefully—I won't explain this again. Witches are a race that predominantly inhabits Maruk and Rvydom. They have long lifespans, love dark colors, and are said to only be female."

"Hah," Yuki raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"Witches are also said to cast spells."

Another fantasy world comment?

"Cast spells…? Like magic?" Yuki responded in disbelief.

"Well, you are not wrong thinking in those terms. Although the spells they are capable of casting depends on the Witch."

"Do they fly and make weird potions?"

"Apparently many Witches do… At least according to the historical texts," Ain added the last part after a thoughtful pause.

From the way Ain spoke, Yuki assumed he never encountered a real Witch.

"Have you never seen a Witch, Ain?"

"Me? Not that I know of. Well, there is not a lot of information

on Witches in the first place. In the past, there was a large-scale witch hunt, which greatly decreased their population. Furthermore, Witches make it a point not to reveal themselves. Even if you happen to come across a Witch, there is a high chance you will not realize it."

"Heh," Yuki hummed, impressed. Then it dawned on her, "How do Witches reproduce if they are all female?"

"Clever girl," Luca commented, playing with the hem of her mantle.

"Witches have children with normal men. If the child is male, they remain a normal human like their father. If female—they become a Witch. And eventually the Witch will disappear with her Witch daughter," Ain explained, as though that was a natural course of events.

"So that kind of race exists in this world too, huh?" Yuki muttered fascinated. After a moment's thought she added, "So why do I have to dress up like one of those *Witches*? That's what I want to know the most."

Yuki yanked the hem of her mantle away from Luca. Ain didn't seem to know the answer to her question. "Uum…" he mumbled, glancing at Luca.

"You see, the conquering general holding the castle in Fol right now," Luca smirked, "is rumored to have a thing for little girls. In the past he laid his hands on a certain girl."

Has a thing for little girls? Meaning he's a pedophile? Ew! Yuki grimaced.

"And apparently that girl was actually a Witch…and she viciously turned the tables on him."

"I see…what a disgusting general. But what exactly does that have to do with my clothing?" Yuki questioned, slamming her fist on the table in front of Luca. She did not like where this plan was heading. He didn't flinch—he merely glanced at her.

"You might not know this, but there's a Witch known as the *Legendary Witch*. She looks around ten years old and is said to have violet eyes."

Yuki's bad feeling about the situation doubled. Was Luca planning to use her to dupe the general?

"…Are you telling me to become that Witch?"

"Whether General Isis laid his hands on the Legendary Witch or not, I'm sure your presence will traumatize him." Luca looked Yuki straight in the eyes. His sullen expression was as hard to read as always, but she thought his eyes were sincere. "Will you come with me?"

If you plead with me using such a handsome face I won't be able to turn you down, Yuki cursed internally.

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"YOU'LL be fine as long as you stay confident and assert yourself," Luca said, leading Yuki by the hand.

Covered from head to toe by the gray patchwork mantle, Yuki allowed Luca to lead the way, because she couldn't walk well with her face hidden. She had been pulling at the odd material since leaving Luca's encampment at the edge of Fol.

Ain's words echoed in Yuki's head. "I heard General Isis is keeping Adolunde's prisoners of war locked in Fol Castle. No sooner than he set foot on Fol's battlefield was he able to overwhelmingly fight his way through any resistance to the castle itself. He easily overtook the guards and conquered the castle. He put out an open invitation for Prince Luca and his Master to come and negotiate with him since the day he took over."

The man must be scary if he's accomplished all this so quickly. Yuki shivered at the thought of meeting him.

Luca's troops easily pushed back any wandering soldiers and surrounded Fol Castle after setting up camp a slight distance away. Only Luca and Yuki were invited inside to discuss the next course of action with General Isis. An invitation that would have resulted in an all-out battle had it been refused.

"Why must I go with him?" Yuki asked.

"The messenger stated those taken captive will be executed unless Prince Luca and his Master come."

"Master?" Yuki asked, confused.

"Within the Knighthood, Prince Luca has taken you as his Master." Yuki blinked before realizing the ceremony at Adolunde's Castle had made her Luca's official Master.

Entirely unaware of her thoughts, Ain continued, "There is also the possibility of the enemy taking you hostage, or finding another use for you, I'm sure. General Isis is a depraved man, and I would not put it past him to have invited you for that purpose."

"A battle would have started right away had I turned it down," Luca explained after accepting the invitation. "The most satisfactory result would be the capitulation of the castle, but I want to prioritize rescuing the prisoners first. That's why I accepted his invitation. Understand?"

That's what he said, but… I don't even know whether I can do anything to help—yet I came to a place like this. I can pretend I'm the Witch and make a run for it if things get ugly, but I doubt I can be of actual use except as a shield. Yuki's archery case clattered against her back with every step. *I don't understand this guy.*

She walked toward the castle gate with Luca's hand clasped

around hers. Thinking about it, Yuki realized she didn't even know how old he was. All she knew right now was his hand was colder than hers—in fact, it was freezing. She glanced up at him through the opening in her mantle.

"Look straight," he angrily chided.

I get the feeling he's not a bad person, but… He gave her a decent amount of space, explained things when she was confused, and provided for her when she needed food and shelter. *He's got a horrible split personality though.*

One thing she learned by traveling with Luca for the last week was he could be incredibly courteous. He would smile brightly and be polite in front of the people in the different towns they visited along the way, but when he was with just Yuki and Ain his face would suddenly sour. His charming smile replaced by a nasty nihilistic smile.

Well, I'm sure his uncivil side is the real him. He's pretty skilled to constantly change his expressions and attitude. Yuki was impressed by his dual-personality.

"Don't zone out," Luca said, squeezing her hand.

Startled, Yuki looked up at Luca's face—he didn't show even the slightest sign of nervousness as he stared straight ahead.

He could be a little more nervous. Just how arrogant is he? What kind of upbringing causes someone to develop two personalities? Well, he is a prince. With his blond hair, blue eyes, handsome physique and swordsmanship, I'm sure he was never troubled to find a woman.

I'm suspicious of whether it's really okay for any human to be as perfect as him. Oh, wait, the fact he has a split personality makes him less than perfect.

"Hehe," Yuki giggled. Luca glared at her. His expression was pained.

"This isn't a place I should have ever taken you, but…"

Yuki's mantle hung low over her face, obstructing her view of him, but his voice sounded apologetic. It was her first time hearing him sound that way. Her chest tightened with panic.

"Somehow my Bonding with you was already brought to Isis' attention—making it impossible to bring someone else. Puts us at a disadvantage."

"Um, then I'll do my best not to get in your way. I'll work with you to help save the prisoners." She squeezed his hand back and peered up at him. What she could see of his face through the opening in the mantle appeared startled by her offer.

"Sorry," he said with his usual mischievous smirk when their eyes met.

Yuki was oddly able to understand why he made her dress like a Witch and held her hand the whole way. *He's trying to reassure me and*

keep me from feeling afraid.

She noticed his consideration of her feelings. The perfect seeming Luca's clumsy kindness tickled at her image of a fantasy prince.

"It was my short temper that had me force you into being my Master. I'll protect you to the best of my ability."

They squeezed each other's hand as the massive door in front of them slowly opened.

Chapter 7

THANKS to the existence of color contacts, Yuki never had to avert her eyes from others. She never felt ashamed of the eyes she inherited from her father, no matter the curious looks she received from others.

***

A soldier acted as their guide upon entering the castle gates, gradually leading them deep within the still damaged fortifications. At the end of the labyrinth of bloodied halls, torn banners, quickly built makeshift furniture, and wary-eyed soldiers, stood a door riddled with cracks. General Isis was waiting for them on the other side.

He was a man of lanky stature and slender physique. His eyes were so narrow no one could tell if they were open. His large top hat clashed greatly with his military uniform, which should have been worn with an armored helm instead.

He looks like a fox, Yuki thought as she stole a peek through the gap in her mantle. She kept her eyes cast down, thinking it best their eyes didn't meet. A small shadow loomed by Isis' feet. A girl the same height as Yuki stood there. The girl wore a long red dress with a loose hem. She squeezed Isis' hand like she was frightened.

"You kept me waiting Lucat. I was beginning to wonder if you would ever accept my invitation," Isis said without preamble.

"Thank you very much for your most kind invitation," Luca responded in a pleasant tenor. Yuki recalled Luca's full name was Cendol Lucat Adolunde.

Oh, he's switched into his fake pleasant mode, Yuki noted as Luca slid into a friendly conversational mode with the general.

Yuki stared at the girl beside Isis. The girl's beautiful jet-black hair nearly reached her waist, and her eyes were a forest green. Yuki smiled when the frightened girl's eyes met hers. The girl's face crumbled like she was about to break down crying, then stiffened when Isis put his hand on her head.

"I never imagined Adolunde's knighted prince had a penchant for little girls."

Yuki felt Luca's hand flinch. By saying Luca had a thing for little

girls, he must have meant Yuki was the object of his affections.

Hang on! What's this guy saying! It's impossible for a man handsome enough the idols of Japan would pale at his good looks to have impure feelings for me—a girl who looks no older than ten!

Yuki frantically tried to deny it—her cheeks flushing red with embarrassment. *What if it's true?*

"Oooh, she has an adorable reaction," Isis' lascivious tone had Yuki using her free hand to pull the mantle past her chin, hiding her face from his perverse leer. "You see, this adorable girl here was quite hard to tame at first, but she's recently become the most obedient little lamb. Submissiveness is charming too, but I always enjoy breaking them the most. Hehehe," Isis' high-pitched, creepy laughter echoed through the room.

"The moment they realize there is no hope and their bodies give in to my touch just does it for me like nothing else will." Isis finished by directing a provocative look toward the shivering girl at his side. His very presence sent a shiver through Yuki.

"About the negotiation terms," Luca mildly interjected. Both his smile and demeanor were subdued, but an intimidating air surrounded him.

"Oh dear, how formal you are to bring up negotiations already. Personally, I would love to become good friends with you before we jump into the negotiations—especially when we share such similar *hobbies*," he said lasciviously. Yuki grimaced, his tone made her sick.

"Besides, it's too boorish to discuss such things right away. I finally have guests visiting my newly acquired castle; it would be rude of me not to host a banquet in your honor."

Luca opened his mouth to say something, but Isis started ordering servants who had been out of sight preparing for the banquet before Luca could object. Isis proceeded, completely ignoring Luca's silent rage.

"Please relax in the room I have prepared for you until everything is ready," Isis said with a sickeningly sweet smile.

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THE room they were led to was very much customized for little girls—or rather, predators trying to win them over. Every nook and cranny of the room was pink with frilly lace attached. The unusually large canopy-covered bed in the center of the room overpowered even the frills on the walls.

Both Luca and Yuki kept their distance from the bed, choosing rather to sip their tea at the table near the front of the room. Exhausted, Yuki leaned heavily into her chair and stole a glance at

Luca as she drank her tea. Luca just put a fifth sugar cube into his black tea.

I wonder if he has a sweet tooth. Or is he so deep in thought he hasn't noticed?

Silence continued to loom between them. Yuki tried several times to start a conversation, but she didn't know what to talk about and couldn't find the right chance to speak. Not to mention there was a high chance they were being spied on—in fact, Yuki expected it. Luca put his teacup to his lips in silence. She was certain the tea would be overwhelmingly sweet, but he drank it with his usual brazenness.

Sitting in a daze not thinking of anything in particular automatically caused Yuki's thoughts to drift toward her own predicament.

Why…am I even here? Just when I thought I was suddenly drowning in a spring, I was unknowingly made the Master of the blond-haired prince who rescued me. And now for some reason I've been brought to a place for war negotiations after being forced to wear strange clothing.

"By the way," Luca turned only his eyes toward Yuki, "what are we going to do now?" she asked. He told her he wanted to free the prisoners, but didn't tell her any of the details. She wondered whether there was anything she could do to help.

"Good question. I was planning to decide based on how Isis dealt his cards, but he's quite the problematic opponent." Luca narrowed his eyes in contempt, as if he had seen something so disgusting he wanted to scrub the image from his brain.

Aah, he must be disgusted that pervert thought he was cut from the same cloth.

"But his kind doesn't have a strong set of convictions, so I'm sure he'll accept if we present him with appealing terms."

Appealing terms… Yuki sighed. She couldn't wrap her mind around what would be appealing and what would be unappealing to someone like Isis.

"Worst-case scenario I'll set a decoy to distract him and open the cells myself."

"…Won't that be difficult?"

"It'll become an instant battlefield when I free them," Luca said matter-of-factly.

…This guy pretends he has no plan then feigns he actually has a plan, when in all reality he actually doesn't have any plan at all. Yuki felt uneasy as she watched Luca vacantly stare into space.

Just when she thought she heard voices outside the door, it opened without the person knocking. She quickly covered herself with the mantle.

"Pardon me. I apologize for the wait. General Isis' banquet has

been prepared. If you would follow me I will escort you," said an uncouth grim-faced soldier standing in the doorway.

"Not at all. You were quite expedient. Come now, Yuki, let's go."

"Only Prince Luca has been invited to the banquet," the uncouth man said to the mildly smiling Luca.

"Oh?" Luca replied calmly, but there was a hidden edge to his tone.

The soldier didn't seem to notice as he continued, "Your companion is to relax in this room. Her food will be brought here."

Yuki peered through the opening in her mantle at Luca who was all smiles.

"Then I guess I'll have Yuki wait for me here." Luca turned his back to the soldier and looked at Yuki with a stern expression. His eyes said, "Stay here." She nodded.

"I'll be going then, Yuki. I'll be back soon, so don't go wandering about," Luca said, patting her on the head before leaving the room.

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"…THERE'S nothing to do," Yuki grumbled.

Several minutes after Luca left, Yuki dived onto the canopy bed. As the solider said, food was brought to the room for her, but her nerves were so strung she had lost her appetite and left the food untouched on the table.

"What is that guy planning on doing?"

Maybe he sneaked into enemy territory intending to slaughter everyone on his own?

"Nah, his allies outside would never stand for that plan…"

Besides, he's a prince. The war would worsen if he did something like that.

"But what if that was the goal all along? I mean why was I invited here in the first place if they were planning on forcing us to eat separately after locking me in this room? Isn't that strange?" she asked no one in particular.

"…Wait a minute, what if what I took as him saying 'stay here' was actually him saying, 'I leave the rest to you'?"

The more Yuki thought about it the more uneasy she felt. The more she considered it, the more believable the idea became, eventually leading her into deluding herself that was what Luca meant.

"…I feel just like a hero who snuck into enemy territory. Actually, I feel more like Romeo going to meet Juliet," she giggled and rolled out of bed. She put her ear against the only door to the room—she didn't hear anything on the other side. She cautiously opened the

door.

“Oh my.” She completely thought someone would be standing guard on the other side. Not only was no one there, but the door was left unlocked too. “Could this be a sign from God telling me to go?”

Yuki slowly exited the room, shutting the door without a sound. She readjusted the mantle over her head, and slunk into the shadows of the hallway to begin wandering about the conquered castle.

Chapter 8

LUCA was startled by the room the soldiers lead him to. The room was in the dungeon for some reason, and filled with young girls.

"Welcome, Prince Lucat. How do you like this paradise of mine?" Isis boasted.

Girls clad in gorgeous gowns sat in the room like dolls on a collector's shelf. Isis sat on a chair in the back of the room—the girl with black hair and green eyes from earlier sat on his lap.

"I heard you only just acquired this castle the other day, General Isis. Was I mistaken?"

Isis laughed as if what Luca said was amusing. Luca's revulsion toward him grew at the sound of his despicable laughter.

"That's just what we made known to the public. A month has passed since I first took this castle from its predecessors. In the meantime, I have received the castle town's young girls, sold off the women, captured the men, and killed anyone who defied me. Please look," Isis gestured toward the girls around him.

"Look at these darling girls and how their eyes just scream they're on the verge of utter despair. Doesn't it just give you a thrilling chill? Don't you think so too, Prince Lucat?"

The girls kept their eyes downcast, sitting there like broken dolls.

"Now then, why don't we continue our conversation here? You know the so-called negotiations you spoke of?" Luca frowned at Isis' daring and uncanny smile.

"About the prisoners of war from your country—ah, for the time being I've avoided killing them and have fed them. Normally I should either send them to my country or use and abuse them as I please, but I had my reservations because you never know what people from Adolunde will do. So they're a nuisance."

"…What are your terms?"

Money, I'm sure. Luca thought, slightly despaired as he stared at Isis. He couldn't understand what Isis found so funny to burst out cackling.

"You know how things go! How experienced you are at this! My, this truly is delightful. You sure know how futile it would be to waste time with some shrewd attempt at haggling over terms with me!"

Luca wanted to sigh.

Perhaps Isis grew sick of laughing, or just exhausted from it, because he took a deep breath and continued talking, “Phew. Well then, why don’t we have a fun chat?” He smiled suggestively, casting an amused look at Luca.

A worthless chat was one way to drag things out, giving Luca’s men more time to commence their plan.

“Oh? A chat about the time you betrayed Adolunde?” Luca baited him.

The man with foxlike eyes laughing in front of Luca was once one of Adolunde’s generals. He held a high position too. However, one day he slaughtered many of his own men like a madman and fled to Maruk with information on Adolunde.

Luca had sparred with him as a child. Even now, Isis called Luca ‘Prince Lucat’, as he had in the past.

“No, I won’t bore you with that topic. My betrayal was meant to be, and that is all there is to it. Let’s see, why don’t we talk about your new pastime?” Isis countered, not taking his bait. Luca’s face twitched. “I heard you picked up the adorable girl you have with you.”

“…Did you now?”

He’s got ears like a Red Fox, Luca thought bitterly.

“I also heard she is one of Rvydom’s Lost Children, but I wonder if that’s true.”

Luca doubted his ears—barely a week had passed since Yuki came to him. How did a commissioned officer of Adolunde’s enemy know so much about her?

“My, just thinking about it makes me tingle all over. I’ve heard Rvydom’s Children possess mysterious powers. Don’t you think it will be most wonderfully beneficial if I break her and make her mine?”

“…I wonder about that.”

Are they not ready yet? I’m sick of being in this room with this man. And I’m worried about the violet-eyed girl—Yuki. Why does Isis know about her? I should have never left her alone. I thought I was the one in danger, so I didn’t bring her. But Yuki is actually in the most danger. I have to get back to where she is, Luca thought impatiently, but he couldn’t let his enemy guess at his restlessness.

“What are you going to demand after bringing up that topic?”

“I see you are still a wise child, Prince Lucat. Won’t you give her to me? She is what I want in return for freeing the prisoners.”

Luca thought he would say that after he brought up Yuki. *Sleazebag*. He glared at Isis, unsure whether he wanted Yuki because he knew her importance or not. Isis aimlessly stroked the girl’s cheek.

“I will give you one of the girls here in return, although I know they are not quite the same. You can pick any one of them. I have confidence in how I broke them in. Or, Prince Lucat, would you like to

go into the dungeon cell in the prisoners' stead?"

"I decline both options."

"Oh, but you don't have the right to decline, Prince Lucat. I had her food laced with drugs. My soldiers have most likely captured her by now."

"You—"

"Will you give your precious Master to me? Or will you sell yourself to an enemy kingdom to protect your Master? Please think long and hard about your choice." Isis lowered the girl from his lap and stood. "I want you to think things over here for a while, Prince Lucat. Why don't I bring the Lost Child here for you when I'm done?"

Isis left the room cackling, taking the black-haired girl with him. Several brawny soldiers stood watch outside the door—a preventive measure to keep Luca from escaping.

"…Damn it!"

Not much longer and our plan will come to fruition! I'm certain the prisoners have already been taken care of. But will Yuki be okay? I can't help worrying about her. I pray all goes well…

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YUKI passed a soldier immediately after she sneaked out of the girly pedophile-trap room. The soldier came with a lamp from the other end of the hall. Yuki quickly pulled her mantle close to her and clung to the wall. Fortunately for her, the hallway was wide and dark—the soldier didn't notice her when he walked by and stood in front of her room.

So there was a soldier put on guard after all. Must have been a change in the guard or…a lucky bathroom break? Grateful for how lucky she was, Yuki proceeded down the hallway, putting distance between her and the room.

Prisoners of war have to be imprisoned somewhere, right? I guess a castle would have the prison in the dungeon.

At the end of the hallway were a set of stairs that went down and a set going up. After a moment's hesitation, Yuki took the stairs going down. She descended many sets of spiral staircases before coming out at a chilly room. The corridor forked left and right. She could hear water somewhere in the distance.

Water? Now that I think about it, I remember hearing somewhere that someone staved off starvation with the water passing through the jail walls. It happened in Japan though. She quipped at herself; she knew she wasn't in Japan. Yuki took a deep breath and shut her eyes. She strained her ears to hear which direction the sound came from.

"…This way." Yuki dashed down the left corridor, careful not to

make a sound.

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AIN glared at the sun. The sun had mostly set on the other side of the horizon—the remaining sunlight was a deep red. His tied back indigo hair was dyed by the violet color of dusk, taking on the same color as the eastern sky.

"We have waited long enough, right?" his muttered words rode on the wind into the distance without being heard.

"Sir Ain… Prince Luca will be fine if we're somewhat earlier than planned. Let's hurry inside," said one of the soldiers waiting with him.

"Yeah…you're right, but Yuki is there, so we have to proceed carefully."

Ain was waiting under Fol Castle's bridge with several elite soldiers. They were standing in front of a back entrance to the castle, keeping watch on the door after they took out the nearby guards.

"We can't put Prince Luca in danger for the safety of one little girl!"

"…You're contradicting what you just said about Luca being able to handle himself." Ain sighed when the soldier shut up.

Aaah, if only Nasette was here, things would go much smoother.

"At any rate, please wait awhile longer. I was entrusted with giving the orders for this mission."

Luca was very vague when he entrusted Ain with the mission, so Ain was anxious about all of the small details, but he purposely acted confident to hide his worry. The sole thing Luca did teach Ain was to never show weakness when commanding others.

Please be safe…Prince Luca.

***

THE door burst open while Luca sat zoned out in the underground room surrounded by doll-like girls. Isis barged into the room, his face red with rage.

"Where did you put her!"

"Huh?" Luca raised a skeptical eyebrow.

Isis questioned the guards whether the door ever opened. After he asked them about ten times, he turned vehemently on Luca. "I went to her room thinking the drugs in her food would start taking effect, to find the room empty! Prince Lucat, what evil lies did you fill her sweet head with!"

"She…wasn't there?"

Luca told Yuki to stay there—and didn't he see her nod?

"…Quit your jests. Are you trying to confuse me with this farce?" Luca laughed scornfully at Isis.

"Where did she go!" Isis shouted, enraged. He panted heavily, as if he were having a panic attack. The soldiers soothed him into taking deep breaths. "Well, if that is how you want it that is how you will have it. I will have you join the prisoners in their accommodations, Prince Lucat."

"What! That's not what you said before."

"How is it any different? The other prisoners don't matter in the least if you become my prisoner. Come now," Isis said.

The soldiers guarding the door restrained Luca. He contemplated resisting, but his plan depended on keeping their focus on him. He was dragged out of the room by two soldiers restraining his arms behind his back.

What is Ain doing! Has he already secured Yuki? Luca walked through the bloodied stone halls clinging to that small hope.

Chapter 9

YUKI groped her way along the walls of the dark, stone corridor. All she could hear was the occasional drip of water and her breathing. Thinking the corridor was eerie enough for bats to come at her, and fear of what she should do if she came across someone had Yuki take her bow out of the archery case. She carried the assembled bow in her left hand.

Where am I?

She had walked nonstop through the winding corridors. The semicircular canals were driving her insane. She had no idea where she came from, and started wondering whether she kept taking the same path over and over again.

Is it just me, or is it freezing in here? Her right hand trailing the icy stone wall was chilled to the bone. She continued walking until she hit a dead end.

"No way."

Would she have to turn around after coming this far?

"Should I have taken the right corridor instead?" She put her hand and forehead against the stone wall without taking a closer look at it. The cold wall felt good against her hot head, dizzied from nervously wandering around.

"Nngh…!"

"Hm?"

She heard someone. The voice was faint, and she couldn't hear what was said, but she could tell it was male. Yuki put her ear against the stone wall. The voice sounded a little louder.

I guess people are deeper inside…. Does this wall block me from outside? Or is it actually a trap door where pressing the correct stone will lead me to the other side?

Yuki strained her eyes that had gotten used to the darkness, and pressed different sections of the stone wall. Her left hand suddenly hit something.

"Wood?" A wooden nodule was lodged vertically into the stone wall. "It's a knob."

Then shouldn't it open if I push or pull on it? Maybe the other side leads to the prison. It has to. No mistake about it. Yuki yanked on the knob with all her might—it didn't budge.

“Why? It’s got a knob. Don’t you usually pull on knobs?” She hesitated a moment, before muttering, “Nah. This is a world where princes, magic, and the like run rampant. Nothing wrong with pushing a door with a knob. Let’s do this!”

Determined, Yuki pushed on the knob with all her might. The knob locked into the stone wall and grandly fell.

“Eh? Uwaaaa!” She fell with the stone wall into a lighted room. “Ow, ow, ow…”

People were noisily chattering. Was she finally in the prison? She slowly sat up. Cells were inlayed into the walls on both sides of her, all full of people. She lifted her face and saw Isis standing right beside her, and Luca restrained by soldiers a slight distance away. Luca stared at Yuki in shock.

“Uh…what? Um?” Stunned by what was going on, Yuki did nothing as Isis picked her up. Arrows tumbled out of her opened archery case. “Whoa!”

“Like a moth flying into the flame—as they like to say. Don’t you think, Prince Lucat?” Isis held her by the waist at his side. “How unfortunate for you I quickly figured out she disappeared.” Isis’ voice was full of ecstasy.

Huh? What? Was I just caught? But why is that man captured too?

Isis cackled creepily.

Maybe he was caught attempting to free the prisoners… Isn’t this a total mess? Yuki started to panic.

“…Which means this girl, the prisoners, and Prince Lucat all belong to me. Is that all right with you?”

Huh? What does he mean I belong to him? He can’t mean that? The nasty thing pedophiles do. Is that going to happen to me? Is that what this means? Yuki despaired, imagining herself as Isis’ plaything. *No! I absolutely don’t want that! Is there something, anything I can do?*

Yuki racked her mind, but everything she came up with seemed pointless. She struggled in his arms, but her long skirt and mantle got in the way, hindering her movement. *Aaah, geez, I can’t escape in these clothes!*

She suddenly remembered why she got stuck wearing this outfit.

“And apparently that girl was actually a witch…and she viciously turned the tables on him.”

“You might not know about it, but there’s a Witch known as the Legendary Witch. She looks around ten years old and is said to have violet eyes.”

Yuki had the strange feeling everything fell silent around her. *I get it. This man must have met the Legendary Witch before. And she took her revenge on him.* She knew what she had to do now. *Can I do it? No, I have to do it!*

She inhaled deeply, and then chortled. “Hehehehe… aaaaHAHAHAHA!”

Of course, Isis and Luca stared at the cackling Yuki.

“Like a moth flying into a flame…. What you got ahold of might not be a bug. Perhaps it’s a Witch.”

Yuki peeled the mantle back from her face with the left hand still clenching her bow. She smiled complacently at Isis; he dropped her on the ground backpedaling as if Yuki had caught fire. She quickly grabbed a fallen arrow, and pulled off the entire mantle.

My introduction went okay. I can do this. I can deceive him! I will deceive him!

Yuki told her pounding heart tearing at her chest it would be okay, then smiled sadistically. “Long time no *seeeee*. How many years has it been, dear Isisy?”

“Eek!” Isis gasped and jumped back. “W-W-Wh-Who are you!”

“Oh my, how could you? Did you forget about me, dear Isisy? Don’t you remember these violet *eyeees* of mine?”

“Viol—”

“Did you forget? How cruel of you. I had such a blast playing with you *toooo*.”

“Play—what you did! Because of what you did! Because of that, my body is stuck this way!”

His body is stuck this way? What does he mean? The guys told me Witches use something similar to magic. Maybe he’s talking about something along those lines.

“What’s wrong with it? You’re *soooo* adorable this way. I love it, you know?”

I wonder whether that guy knows. Yuki looked over her shoulder at Luca smiling intrepidly. He caught onto her act.

“Hey, Lukey-poo? Don’t you think he’s adorable?”

Luca frowned for a moment, before flashing his usual wolf in sheep’s clothing smile. “Yes, I would absolutely love to see what he looks like underneath that hat.”

“Eeek!” Isis frantically clamped his hat to his head. His frightened reaction reminded Yuki of a child faced with a terrifying bully. She felt kind of bad, and utterly thrilled from the exhilaration of it all.

I’ll know if I get the hat off him?

Isis was significantly taller than Yuki. Furthermore, there was no way for her to take the hat off him when he fled at her mere approach. Vexed, she clenched her fists, her hand clasping around her bow.

I know! I can use this!

Yuki lifted her bow. She pulled back on the string and matched

the arrow point to her target. *My target is huge, so I can do this.*

"Then, why don't I take it off for you?" she said, firing the arrow. The arrow flew faster than Isis could crouch down, piercing the hat against the wall. Golden fox ears twitched on his head.

"……"

"……"

Luca, Yuki, and even the soldiers restraining Luca, were speechless. Isis cried and screamed as he tried to hide the ears under his hands.

"Pft! Puahahahahahahaha! So cute!"

"A-A-After what you did, everything went horrible! Even after I captured other Witches and forced them to take a look, they said although they could halt the process of transforming into a full fox, only you can cure me completely! I ran around looking for you everywhere, but couldn't find you!"

I knew it. So this is how the Legendary Witch talks.

"Oooh my, are you dissatisfied with what a cutie patootie I made you? I think this way is far cuter than your pigheaded, disagreeable human male looks though."

"I-I-I don't care! Just fix me already!"

Yuki giggled then switched back to a serious expression. Isis froze.

"…Is that the right attitude to ask a favor with, I wonder?" she asked coldly.

"Ugh…" Isis gulped.

"You carried me like luggage. You treated *my* darling Lukey-poo like trash. And then you beg me, 'please fix me, great one'. Isn't that strange? Why don't you start by making amends and release my Lukey-poo?"

"L-Let him go," Isis ordered his soldiers. The soldiers reluctantly released Luca.

"S-See, I let him go, so revert me back to normal!"

Even if you ask me to, I can't. I can't fix him. So why don't I take this as far as I can to beat some sense into him? She walked over to Isis, picking an arrow up on the way.

"Worst-case scenario I'll just set a decoy to distract him, and open the cells myself."

Yuki recalled what Luca told her earlier. *Isn't this the worst-case scenario?* She thought absently. She calmly pulled the arrow back. "Mr. Soldier, over there. Hey, if you don't want this man to be killed, can you do me a favor and open the prison cells?"

"Y-You LIIIIIIIIIIIAAAAAAAAAR!" Isis bellowed.

"I haven't lied. I'm just asking a little favor. You see, this arrow might not have a point, but it's enough to pierce straight through your

thick head, dear Isisy." Yuki spoke as if her archery practice arrow was special to trick him.

"O-O-O-OPEN THE CELLS! OPEN THEM, I SAID! WHAT ARE YOU DOING!" a trembling Isis shouted. He fled backward to escape the arrow. Yuki approached him, keeping a set distance between them in case he regained his nerve and attacked.

Two of the bewildered soldiers raised their voices and opened the jail cells. The moment the cells opened the people inside poured out, captured the soldiers, and knocked them onto the ground. The prisoners got on top of the soldiers and kept them from moving.

Seeing the situation was now in their favor, Yuki smiled sweetly. "Hey, sweet Isisy, if you want to return to normal—why don't you surrender?"

Chapter 10

YUKI sat staring in a daze at the grand banquet. After Yuki's Witch act, Ain's forces sieged the castle, joining arms with the freed prisoners to take out Isis' troops and reclaim Fol Castle. Isis, who Yuki had captured, was sent ahead with a small platoon to Adolunde Castle. The rest of the troops were holding a celebratory banquet inside Fol Castle. Luca and Yuki were seated at the area reserved for the guests of honor.

Once things settled down after reclaiming the castle, Ain brought a dazed Yuki back to her carriage. By the time she came to her senses, her clothing was changed to a soft pink dress.

"…Are you sleepy?" Luca curtly asked Yuki. She smiled at him.

"No. Not tired. I just feel like it's not over yet. I was hit by an adrenaline rush back there," she explained with a dry smile.

"…You were realistic," Luca chuckled, remembering Yuki's Witch act. "That was the first time anyone has ever said my name like that."

Heat rushed to her cheeks. She was embarrassed enough she thought she would die from the shame. Yuki was undeniably the one who endearingly called the prince sitting beside her, 'Lukey-poo'.

"Sh-Shut up! I thought the Legendary Witch would at least act outside the bounds of common sense and do whatever she pleases!" She turned away, hoping her embarrassment would pass before he saw her face.

Luca chuckled again at her reaction. "Well, we were saved thanks to your quick thinking. You have my thanks, Yuki."

His serious voice made her look back at him. He sat beside her with his usual unreadable expression, but his eyes had a gentleness to them.

"N-N-No need to thank me. I mean even if I hadn't done what I did back there, Ain and the other soldiers would have sieged the castle and sorted out the sticky situation for us, right?"

Jumping to a hasty conclusion made her put on such an embarrassing act for no reason.

"Yeah. Well…that's true."

I wanted you to at least deny it a little bit, Yuki thought, suddenly remembering the broken eyes of the girl she saw with Isis.

"Hey, what's going to happen to all those girls?"

Luca glanced at her like he didn't know what she was talking about, but quickly caught on. "Aah, I had them escorted to the castle with Isis earlier. They will get the help they deserve."

"I see…"

Isis broke the girls to the point they were like dolls. Silence flowed between them, until Ain dashed over and hopped on the platform with the seats of honor.

"Prince Luca! I AM SO, SO, SO SORRY! Please forgive me! I'm the one at fault for misjudging the timing!" Ain grabbed Luca's arms and shook him back and forth. Luca sighed and grabbed his hands.

"You are. I never thought we could recapture the castle without bloodshed. On the contrary, I should commend you for messing up the time and waiting so long. Although the commendation is a personal one."

"D-D-Don't be absurd!" Ain put his head to the floor with such vehemence it almost looked like he jumped in the air and slammed his forehead on the ground. His head suddenly jolted back up and he stared straight at Yuki. "Yuki too. I'm sorry. If I had stormed the castle sooner, you and Prince Luca wouldn't have been in danger."

Ain looked like a puppy abandoned in the rain. Yuki hastily responded, "Don't be! I wasn't in any real danger! Don't worry about it! Besides, I'm glad no one was hurt. So really, don't let it get to you," she smiled. Ain got teary-eyed. He smiled broadly before bear hugging Yuki. Startled, she drew back—he smelled terribly of alcohol.

Ah, is Ain drunk?

"Thank you! You really are a great girl, Yuki! I wonder whether this is what it would have been like if I had a sister." He patted her head like a dog as he squeezed her as tightly as possible.

"Ain, it hurts."

"Aaaaw! Yuki is too cute!"

Behind Ain's back a group of soldiers were sending pitying looks toward Yuki—Ain just came from their section of the banquet.

A-Am I their scapegoat!

Overcome with surprise, Yuki gave in to his hug without trying to escape, when someone pulled her arm and her back had hit something. She looked over her shoulder at an exasperated Luca.

"Aw darn! Prince Luca, you meanie! Bully!"

"Ain…you're still too young to drink."

"How RUDE! I'm a bona fide adult 'dis year! As such, I should be able to d'ink alcohol already!" Ain's complexion was no different from usual, but his eyes were glazed.

"Come on…you should be aware of your position as someone who serves the royal court."

A soldier appeared with a water jug and handed it to Luca. Luca

picked up a flipped over cup, poured water into it, and handed the cup to Ain. “Here, drink this.”

“Yay! Prince Luca served me! Now I hafta drink up! Here!” Ain grabbed nearby glasses and shoved them into Luca and Yuki’s hands. He forced their glasses to clang together, shouting, “Cheers!” and gulped his whole cup in one go.

“Pheeeeew! I knew it! D’inks served by Prince Luca are the bestest! The alcohol tastes differently!” Ain laughed jovially.

Luca smiled dryly, muttering, “It’s water though.”

Yuki smiled, taking a sip of her glass too. “Hehe,” she laughed. All her tension was suddenly let loose. “Aha! AHAHAHA!”

Once the bottle was unplugged, everything and anything was just so funny, she couldn’t stop laughing. Luca was startled by her sudden burst of laughter.

“Oi, what’s so amusing?”

“Nothing—haha! It’s nothing at all…hehehehe!”

I feel as if I may have found the place I’m supposed to be. I’ve felt like a lost child this whole time. I was worried my parents no longer want me since they pushed me off the balcony. Then I was saved by a foul-mouthed handsome prince when I suddenly found myself drowning in a spring. I felt like I was all alone in the vast darkness of having no direction.

Orga glared at me with hatred-filled eyes for no apparent reason, and Isis treated me like a Witch. I learned having violet eyes is condemned in this world too.

Even when she hid her eyes behind color contact lens and pretended to be normal, Yuki really just wanted someone to accept her violet eyes. She was so scared of rejection she didn’t say anything about it until now. She had a fairly good idea what people would say if they learned not only did she not age, but she had violet eyes too.

She couldn’t talk about it when she was in Japan, but right now neither Luca nor Ain treated her any differently because of her eyes. They saved her when her eyes caused problems—they also used her. However, she was happy she was useful to them in saving lives. All those people—the girls, the people imprisoned, the villagers—were free and alive in part because of her actions. Yuki started thinking it might be okay for her to be with them.

I want to return home someday, but…for now…

For now she was annoyed at her parents for what they did, but she wasn’t sad they abandoned her anymore.

For now I want to fully enjoy this world a little longer. She thought in a daze, holding the wine-filled glass in her right hand.

“At any rate, this is amusing,” she snickered. Soldiers were drinking, dancing, and singing in the banquet hall. Up on the guest of honor platform a group of soldiers held down a raging Ain. Luca

watched them cynically as he sipped his alcohol.

"…I'm really glad…the people here…weren't hurt." Parched, Yuki grabbed a bottle carelessly left lying around and drank from it. The more she drank, the more she felt like she was on cloud nine. By her fifth glass, Yuki's consciousness fell victim to the depths of alcohol.

***

WHEN she woke up the following morning, not a single person would tell her what happened at the banquet.

"Underage children shouldn't drink," Luca scolded her. She glanced over at Ain trying to hide his face and embarrassment behind his hands.

"Like I said, it's not just me!" Ain had absolutely no memory of last night after he started drinking, but Yuki clearly remembered his jumping face-plant bow, him bear-hugging her, and his attitude toward Luca.

Soldiers clad in armor patted him on the head after teasing him.

"Please stop that!" Ain hissed like a cat with its back arched defensively. "Besides, I'm not the only one who's a bad drunk!"

"Heh. This is my first time hearing there's a worse drunk than you. Who is it?" a large soldier chuckled lightheartedly.

Ain fell silent. Lowering his voice, "…Prince Luca."

For a second, all fell silent. The next moment the soldiers roared with laughter.

"Nah, the audacious Prince Luca is probably the only one among us who has never gotten drunk before, I bet!"

"What? Are you still drunk, Ain?"

The soldiers continued teasing Ain about it, before finally someone said, "But I wonder what happens when Prince Luca does get drunk."

The soldiers started throwing out random guesses such as he would become a kissing monster, start stripping, lecture others, or maybe challenge people to a duel when he gets drunk.

"So, Ain, what happens when Prince Luca gets drunk?"

Ain stayed quiet. "…He's a touchy drunk."

"Huh?"

"What was that? Speak up?" The Soldiers chuckled smacking Ain on the back.

Ain paused briefly, before everyone heard him cry out, "He felt me up!"

Chapter 11

YUKI heaved a heavy sigh in the carriage headed back to Adolunde Castle after successfully recapturing Fol. “What…on Earth did I do?”

Her memories of last night cut off at a certain point. She thought she had fallen asleep, but the others were acting too strange about it for that to be the case. Luca reprimanded her for a long time, putting the nail in the coffin for her to never drink alcohol again.

“Kids stop growing when they drink,” he had teased.

Whether I drink or not, my growth has stopped.

Yuki refrained from telling anyone in Aridol about her real age. One reason was explaining would be a pain, but the main reason was she didn’t want to further reveal how different she was from a normal person. Everyone called her a child and a little girl, and treated her as such, but Yuki wanted to appear normal to the point she preferred being treated like a child.

“Oh my gosh, I didn’t mention that, did I?”

What did she do while under the influence of alcohol that she couldn’t remember? No one would talk about it, as though they agreed not to beforehand. She assumed she must have done something people shouldn’t talk about.

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! She put her hand to her head and rolled around on the carriage seat. *I want to disappear!* She swung her archery case over her head.

The carriage proceeded along the road with a rhythmic rattle. Half a day had yet to pass since departing Fol. They would be traveling like this for another week or so.

“Haah…” she sunk into the comfortable cushion and sighed.

She sat there in a trance, not thinking about anything in particular when she heard someone say her name. She stuck her head out the back of the carriage to see Luca and Ain calling her from their horses. They should have been at the vanguard of the march—instead they were behind Yuki’s carriage with the supply train. Panic and impatience marred their voices.

“What’s wrong? You guys seem flustered,” Yuki remarked.

A flustered Ain flapped his mouth open and closed without making any sounds.

What is it?

Luca and Ain stopped when the carriage came to a halt at their request.

"Nasette—he's one of my retainers," Luca explained with a pained expression. Yuki found his scowl very handsome.

"His father was taken prisoner by Maruk. He informed me he was going to secretly rescue his father, but I just received word he was somehow discovered by Maruk and is currently on the run. His plan was solid though. I can think of only one reason it failed—it was leaked from somewhere," Luca spat. He sounded like he had an idea about who leaked the information.

"…Don't tell me your rotten brother had something to do with it?"

"We can only guess. At any rate, we don't have positive proof. I want my triumphant return back to the castle, but we are going to turn back and head for Maruk."

"What?"

Can a prince move around freely and act without a care for political repercussions? Doesn't he need permission first? Yuki thought dubiously. She wasn't sure whether it was okay to ask, so she didn't bring it up.

"Come with us."

"Huh?" Surprised, she looked at Luca cantering his horse to the luggage side of the carriage.

"Are you okay without your luggage?"

"Ah, yeah." The only luggage Yuki had was her archery case, which she could easily carry.

"I see," Luca said offering his hand.

Is he telling me to ride in front of him?

She timidly took his hand. He easily lifted her onto the horse and placed her snugly between his arms in front of him.

"We're in a rush, so don't fall off," his voice reverberated over her head. She quickly nodded. "Don't fall behind either, Ain."

"I know!"

"Let's go!" Luca said, kicking the horse into a gallop.

"Aaah!" Yuki didn't think a horse could move so fast, but her body fell backward—the back of her head bumped into Luca's chest.

"Don't fall," he whispered near her ear. She blushed and adjusted her sitting position to have a clear view of the scenery in front of them.

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LUCA and Ain had their horses gallop for the next five days. They would stay at the nearest village or town inn when the sun set, buying and selling clothes and supplies as needed at each stop. Yuki thought

it strange Luca could freely travel to different areas without hiding he was a prince.

"Prince Luca is an unprecedented case," Ain answered when she asked about it.

"What does that mean?" she asked, confused.

"Prince Luca was, well…a problematic child."

"A problematic child?"

"Ah, but he isn't as much of one now…or rather… In the past, he used to skip out on his lessons, sneak out of the castle; and then just when I thought he hadn't come back home for a long time I find him, of all places, staying in one of the training camps for Knights!

"The next thing I knew, he came back bearing the crest of a Knight! Tales of his heroic deeds and a reputation as an experienced philanderer spread far and wide. He's calmed down a great deal now, but I was constantly being used and abused by him in the past. Honestly, I should have been by his side to stop him."

Yuki was speechless.

"His actions were most likely forgiven because Prince Luca is the fourth prince."

Basically, because he's not the successor to the throne he could do whatever he wanted? That's the environment he was raised in I guess. Depending on the person, not being cared about isn't too pleasant either. It's almost like his family and kingdom are saying, 'We have no expectations of you from the start', Yuki thought indigently.

Ain spoke about Luca's past with a hint of sadness as he criticized him.

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YUKI caught a glimpse of the state of Aridol through the many different towns they stopped during their journey. Among the townspeople, there were those who warmly welcomed them, and those who attempted to steal their money and supplies. Some people would plead they have pity on them and give them money, and when they wouldn't, the same person would disparage them.

"It is an inevitably," Ain answered Yuki when she asked him why he and Luca didn't get angry, sad, or criticize the cruel things people attempted or said.

War is the same in any world—it only brings about sadness, Yuki thought, a mixture of sadness and a desire not to get involved with the locals growing stronger with every passing village.

Yuki was interested in every destination Luca and Ain stopped at, sticking close to them wherever they went. Eventually though, she found herself waiting outside the stores until they finished their

business. She feared others seeing the color of her eyes, but most of all, she didn't want to witness any more of the sorrow in this war-torn land.

Today too, she waited outside the shops where Luca and Ain were buying supplies soon after arriving in yet another town. Luca and Ain went around visiting the many different stores.

"There's a chance Nasette has left behind a message or something of the sort for us to follow," Luca explained when Yuki asked him why they stopped. "We'll be able to figure out where he is when we find his trail."

The town they were in this time around was bigger than any other they had visited. People busily bustled about in front of her. Although this town didn't show signs of decline or ruin, the local's merriness felt oddly hollow. Perhaps it was because everywhere else she saw until now was both physically and mentally scarred by the ongoing war, while this town only felt the mental impact so far.

The town was dyed crimson by the setting sun. Yuki loved the sunset, because her violet eyes took on a pale blue-gray color in the evening colors. She pulled the mantle off her head. Wearing the hood all day messed her hair up and made it itchy. She peered inside the shop through the window. Ain's arms were full of supplies. They should be done soon.

"Yuki."

Yuki instinctively turned when someone said her name. There stood a large, unfamiliar man. Several other men, she assumed were with him, stood eying Yuki from behind the man.

"Ooh, whaddya know, it is you." The man's face contorted into a nasty smirk.

Yuki got goose bumps. *This man is dangerous, s*he sensed instinctively, and put her hand on the doorknob to flee inside the shop with Luca and Ain for protection.

"I don't think so. Not letting you go to Prince Lucat," he said, easily lifting her into the air.

"Aaah!"

"Let's go."

Yuki was carried away like a sack of potatoes by a group of strange men. Her scream caught Luca and Ain's attention. They looked at her wide-eyed, but it was already too late. Yuki disappeared into the vast town dyed a dark crimson by the sunset.

Chapter 12

LUCA'S blond hair rapidly disappeared into the distance, fading into the crowd of people. A sense of dread encompassed Yuki. Including the man carrying her, there were four men involved in her kidnapping. They all wore revealing, leather clothing.

Why is this happening? What's going on? Yuki's head swayed where she hung upside down from the man's shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Every time her head collided with his back it torqued her neck. She couldn't wrap her mind around the abrupt situation she was suddenly thrust into.

Is this a kidnapping? Is that what this is? It's the only plausible answer. Aren't kidnappings a common occurrence in war-torn lands? But these people know my name. Is Isis trying to get back at me for what I did at Fol? But he's being escorted to Adolunde Castle right now. I doubt he had the freedom to leak information or hire mercenaries.

Then who put these guys up to this? And for what purpose? There's absolutely nothing in it for them to kidnap me. I have no value, Yuki thought, unable to do anything about her current situation. Before she knew it, a sackcloth was put over her head and she was carried into a building.

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SOMETIME after she heard several doors open and close, she was released and had hit the ground.

"Ow!" She landed heavily on her butt and elbow, rolling head over heels with the impact. The sackcloth was ripped from her head, revealing four middle-aged men surrounding her.

Fear was the first emotion to overwhelm her. *What do these men plan to do with—or to me? The one thing I know for sure is that it won't be anything good for me. Will anyone come to my rescue?* Yuki looked around—she was in a room similar to the inns she stayed at with Luca and Ain during their journey. Two beds lined the wall to her right, and a window was directly behind her.

The only people I know in this world are Ain and Luca. So why must I be kidnapped when I don't know anyone and haven't done anything? She

simmered with anger.

"…What do you want with me?"

"We don't want anythin' from you. We were just told to capture you," answered her kidnapper.

"Told by whom?"

"Can't tell you," the man smirked, revealing several missing teeth surrounded by the yellowest set of teeth she had ever seen.

Yuki's time in Aridol may not have been long, but she had already seen her fair share of his sort. Before coming to this town, she saw a village that had been plundered by bandits. They ransacked the entire village's food and supplies, leaving the survivors with nothing more than broken buildings. Luca searched out the bandits' base and destroyed them before continuing their journey. The men who kidnapped Yuki were similar to the scum Luca had taken care of.

"These types will do anything for money," Luca said to her with disgust while he cleaned his sword.

Someone must have paid them to kidnap me, Yuki thought, racking her brain for possible suspects. *Is it Luca's rotten older brother, Orga's doing? If it is him, why would he do this?*

Yuki shouldn't have any value in their world. Aside from her rare eye color, she wasn't even a useful pawn.

Ah, is it because I'm Luca's Master? It fit. Luca's country, Adolunde, was currently at war—and he was the fourth prince. He was also a Knight of high rank, and was strengthened greatly by his contract with Yuki. By killing Yuki, the contract would be nullified, weakening Luca and making him easier to kill. That reason made sense to Yuki.

The men were smirking and leering at her as they licked their lips—as if she were their prey. They were enjoying her fear.

"…Don't screw with me," she shouted.

"Huuh?"

"I won't let you kill me!" Yuki bolted from the floor and charged the men. The confused men stretched out their arms to catch her, but she stooped down and slipped out of their reach. She lunged for the doorknob, opened the door, and dashed into the hallway. The men yelled behind her.

Without any idea where to go, she just ran straight. Suddenly, one of the doors in the hallway opened in front of her and a large man stepped out. Unable to stop in time, she rammed into him at full speed and fell back on her butt.

"Aaaah!"

"Whoa!" The man wasn't affected by her small body bumping into him. "Are you okay?" he asked, offering her his hand.

"I-I'm sorry."

The man's long orange hair and tanned skin left an impression on Yuki. She tried to take his hand, but someone's arm wrapped around her waist and lifted her off the ground.

"Don't go runnin' away!" the ruffian who kidnapped her bellowed, tightening his grip around her waist.

She went rigid. "Stop it! Let go of me!"

The man with orange hair looked shocked when their eyes met. "Help me!"

"Shut up!" the man yelled, covering her mouth with his hand. Her screams were muffled by his hand as he dragged her back to his room.

He tossed her on one of the beds this time. Just as she tried to sit up, the man pushed her down and put his weight on her. Feeling a whole different type of danger for her safety now, she kicked and flailed her arms to knock him off.

First a perverted pedophile general tried to drug me and make me his new dolly, now I'm stuck with being gang raped by ruffians who kidnapped me for who knows why! This world has gone beyond immoral and wild!

The man thrust his hand into the collar of her dress and ripped it off.

"~~~~!"

He flipped her onto her stomach, and ripped off the back of her dress.

"Does she have one?"

"No."

The men were talking about something she didn't understand. Yuki frantically tried to cover her chest as she shrunk away from the men. Cold air beat against her exposed back. She couldn't tell whether she was shaking uncontrollably from the chilly air or the fear. The man grabbed her ankles and dragged her down the bed toward him.

"S-Stop it! Let go!" She struggled the best she could to escape, feeling an intense dread for what was going to happen.

"Shut your mouth! You wench!"

The sound of something impacting her face was followed by intense pain in her left cheek. Ringing filled her ears, and her mind was emptied of thoughts. Through the ringing in her ears she heard someone knocking on the door.

"Um, excuse me? Uh well, could you give me a moment of your time?" asked a carefree voice on the other side of the door where the knocking continued.

The men attempted to ignore it, but the continuous banging on the door finally annoyed one of them enough he clicked his tongue.

"Oi, shut him up."

"My pleasure."

One of the men went to the door. Just when Yuki thought she heard the door open, the man who opened it went flying inside and slammed against the table. The shocked group of men turned toward the door. Surprised, Yuki looked too—the man she bumped into stood in the doorway. A look of pity flashed across his face when he spotted Yuki, but it was immediately replaced by a jovial grin.

"No matter the world or country, no one should do something like this."

"Who the hell are you!" The bandit raised his fist to hit the man with orange hair, but his opponent's movements were agile despite his large build—the bandit crashed into the floor with a dull thud. In only a matter of moments, all the bandits were left unconscious on the floor.

"Hi there, young lady. Are you all right?"

The way you smile casually like nothing is happening is scary, Yuki thought, but nodded.

"I see. Glad to hear it… Ah, well, how should I say this? I'm staying in the next room over…and well…want to come with me? They might be a bit big for you, but I can lend you my little sister's clothes."

"Th-Thanks."

He offered his hand again. This time she took it.

Chapter 13

A beautiful girl around fifteen years old sat with an aura of worry in the man's room. She had almost transparent-white skin and curly chestnut-brown hair flowing to her shoulders. Her eyes shared the same chestnut color as her hair. She jumped to her feet and ran to Yuki and the man when they entered the room.

"Brother! Are you okay?" she asked.

The man beside Yuki smiled lightheartedly in response. The girl returned a relieved smile then turned to Yuki. "Are you all right, too? Did they do anything to you?"

"N-No, I'm okay," Yuki responded, gripping the ripped dress together to cover her exposed chest. The girl's expression clouded at Yuki's ripped clothes.

"How terrible… Come now, why don't we get you into some new clothes? My clothes might be slightly too big for you, but loose clothing is better than ripped," she said, taking Yuki's hand.

She led Yuki to the closet and held dresses to her until she found a short indigo dress. Yuki changed into the dress; the area around her shoulders was a bit big, but overall it was more comfortable than her previous attire. The girl suggested Yuki sit in one of the chairs surrounding a wooden table where she placed three cups of steaming tea.

"U-Um, thank you very much for what you did for me," Yuki said, bowing her head. The man smiled.

"What, that? Don't let it get to ya. People should help each other out in times of need." He stretched out his large hand from where he sat opposite of her and rubbed the top of her head, messing up her hair.

The girl took a sip of her tea. Placing the cup back on its saucer she said, "Now then, I apologize for our late introductions. My name is Tita. What is yours?"

"Y-Yuki."

"Yuki, is it? What a lovely name," Tita smiled gracefully. A nice fragrance seemed to waft from her.

"Oh yeah, we haven't introduced ourselves yet. I'm Nasette."

Yuki mentally repeated their unusual names to remember them because she couldn't even imagine how they were spelled. It took a

moment before she shockingly realized she had heard one of their names before. Hadn't Ain mentioned the name over and over again during their journey together?

"Nasette!"

"Whoa!" Shocked she suddenly said his name, Nasette asked, "What's up?"

"I've heard your name before. Is Nasette a really common name in this world?"

"I-I'm not sure. Back when I stayed at the training dorms there was one other person with the name."

"I see…um…then how about Ain? Do you know a young man named Ain?"

Nasette and Tita were surprised by Ain's name.

"By Ain, do you mean Ain Revent?"

Yuki tilted her head at the unfamiliar last name. "Ah, I'm sorry. I only know his first name is Ain. Um, he has indigo blue hair and black eyes…"

"Then he is most likely the Ain we know." Tita glanced at the ring on Yuki's finger. "Hey, Yuki? I only just noticed your ring, but… what happened to your Knight?"

"What?" Yuki tilted her head.

By Knight, does she mean Luca? What does she mean by what happened to him?

Tita took Yuki's right hand and held it up to the lamplight.

"…It's violet."

"Violet, you say!" Shocked, Nasette yanked on Yuki's hand. "Oh yeah…this is violet all right."

Yuki had absolutely no idea what the violet glow exuding from her silver ring meant. "They aren't all this color?"

"Oh dear. You didn't know about it, Yuki? The ring's glow changes based on the Knight's color rank."

"…Knights are ranked by color?"

Tita and Nasette were speechless. Yuki wondered whether she said something bad and wanted to smooth over her error, but couldn't find the right words to explain, so she sat there awkwardly.

"Yuki, violet is the designation for the highest rank."

"What? Really?"

Then Luca is that powerful and amazing? Why on Earth did he pick me to be his Master then? Yuki thought, staring at her ring.

"There are only a few Violet Knights in each country…" Tita muttered, suddenly freezing. Curious about her reaction, Nasette and Yuki stared at her. "Wait a minute."

"Wh-What's wrong, Tita?" Nasette asked.

"Yuki, you were with Ain, right?"

“Y-Yeah?” Yuki stuttered over the overwhelming aura exuding from Tita.

“And Yuki’s Knight is a Violet Knight.”

“Yeah, that’s right. What’s the problem—” Nasette tried to say, but Tita stood and glared at him.

“Brother, haven’t you noticed it yet? Isn’t it obvious that Yuki’s Knight is Luca!”

“Huh? Aaaah! Good point! That’s a really good point…Wait, what!”

“Huh, what? Wait, what’s wrong?” Yuki asked, bewildered by their sudden excitement.

“But our Luca would never make another contract,” Nasette commented.

“Who is Yuki’s Knight if not Luca? I doubt Ain would ever become a Knight,” Tita countered.

They debated the topic while looking at Yuki.

“So, Yuki, is your Knight Luca?” Tita asked her.

Yuki was intimidated by Tita’s dollish features, but nodded anyway.

“See! But thank goodness—now we will be freed from the hell of going to taverns every night.”

“Taverns?”

“Yes. Isn’t there a saying that where there’s alcohol, there’s information? So we thought if Luca and Ain were in the same town we would run into them if we went to the local taverns. But now that you’re here, we don’t have to look for them anymore.”

“Ah…but I don’t even know what inn we’re staying at.”

In this vast town, and Yuki’s inability to read their writing, she was the same as a lost child—especially after her kidnappers put a bag over her head when they carried her to the inn. She may have encountered the people Luca was searching for, but how could they meet up with him when they didn’t know where to look?

“Yuki, what are you saying? You should be able to figure out where Luca is right away. Brother, take out your Knight’s Token.”

Nasette pulled a copper Knight’s Token from his chest pocket and handed it to Tita. The token was the size of an adult man’s fist. Luca had a similar token, but his glowed gold—the golden light also appeared violet to Yuki.

“Here you go, Yuki.”

Tita handed the chain attached to the token to Yuki. Yuki sat there holding it, unsure of what to do next.

Tita explained with a smile, “You don’t know about how any of this works, do you? You see, our rings pull against each other like magnets.” She showed Yuki her own ring. Her ring gave off a brown

glow, compared to Yuki's violet. "You take the Knight's Token like this, and suspend the ring from its metal chain."

Yuki took the ring off her right hand's middle finger and put the chain through the center of it. Tita took it and connected both ends of the chain together like a necklace. The ring shook at the bottom of the circle for a while before it abruptly stopped. Yuki stared at it closely—this time the ring emitted a dull light.

"If you do this—see, Luca is in that direction."

The glowing ring floated toward the door.

"The ring can do something like this?" Yuki asked. She was the only one surprised by the floating ring.

Someone knocked on the door. The three of them looked at each other. Nasette nodded to the girls and walked to the door. Tita silently led Yuki deeper into the room. The two of them crouched behind the bed and cautiously watched the door.

"I wonder whether it's the men from earlier," Tita whispered.

"Sir Nasette tied them up with rope, so I don't think it's them…" Yuki answered in a hushed voice.

Nasette turned off the lamps, veiling the room in a gloomy darkness. The door cautiously opened, and a shadow entered the silent room.

Nasette nimbly moved to grab the intruder's neck. But the intruder drew his sword seconds faster, and had it pointed at Nasette's throat.

"…Yo. What a splendid way for you to greet me after all this time," Nasette remarked.

There stood a blond-haired Knight—Luca.

"Luca!" Tita leapt up behind Yuki and dashed over to him.

"Tita," Luca said, surprised to see her. His eyes found Yuki where she hid behind the bed—his expression abruptly shifted to an icy glower. Yuki felt as if he were rebuking her with his eyes.

Ain peered around Luca's shoulder, "Nasette! Tita!"

Luca heaved a tiny sigh. "Explain to me what is going on here."

Yuki was depressed by how angry he must be at her for getting kidnapped.

Chapter 14

THE night wore on as the five of them talked, resulting in their decision to stay in the same inn instead of returning to the inn Luca booked elsewhere. Inside the inn room Luca, Yuki, Nasette, and Ain sat around the table. Tita sat elegantly on the edge of the nearest bed.

After hearing the explanation of how Nasette rescued Yuki because he happened to be staying where the kidnappers took her, Luca only said, “I see,” and silently went to the room Nasette left the kidnappers. Disturbing noises came from the other room for several minutes, before Luca returned to their room with a refreshed expression.

All he said upon his return was, “They didn’t know much. Apparently, they were ordered to kidnap a girl named Yuki, who was supposed to have violet eyes and a Witch’s Seal on her body. They were unduly well-informed on the small details.”

Tita stood from the bed in shock. “She has a Seal?”

“Yuki doesn’t have a Witch’s Seal anywhere on her. I can attest to that,” Luca declared definitively.

Yuki knew there wasn’t a Seal birthmark, brand, scar, or anything else of that nature on her flesh, but she didn’t understand how Luca could attest to the fact.

She eyed him suspiciously, when Ain whispered in her ear, “Remember when the maids changed your clothing back at Adolunde’s castle? Prince Luca had the head maid check you for a Seal.”

“But doesn’t that mean the person who ordered those men to kidnap Yuki suspects she is a Witch? Do they suspect her because of what she did at Fol Castle?” Ain asked Luca.

“…The information spread too fast if that’s the case,” Luca remarked.

“Yes, which would make the mastermind someone capable of obtaining information quickly—and most likely someone in our ranks,” Ain hypothesized.

The room fell silent. They were in a situation where they had to suspect those closest to them first.

“Doesn’t your rotten Older Brother fit the criteria? Don’t you all think it’s him too? Why don’t you mention him?” Yuki asked.

Luca heaved the heaviest sigh yet. “Your boldness is admirable, but my brother holds the true reins of power over all of Adolunde. People are too frightened to even whisper his name.”

“Is that really the reason? …Then why am I the target? Aren’t I the target because you’re a prince and I’m your Master?”

“If he were seriously targeting my life, he would have taken me out when I was much younger. Brother suspects you’re an orphan from Rvydom—essentially, Rvydom’s imperial princess.”

“Huh?” The teacup nearly slipped from Yuki’s hand.

“Do you know why the war started?” Luca asked her.

“No idea,” Yuki answered, carefully placing her teacup back on the saucer. Luca grumbled with exasperation.

I’m not from this world, so of course I wouldn’t know! She was about to say spitefully, when Luca explained.

“A long time ago—well, it’s not long enough to have faded to the back of people’s memories and history books. About twenty years ago, Maruk’s king died, and Rvydom’s king went missing,” Luca said matter-of-factly. “Fifteen years ago, Maruk’s new king invaded the unstable Kingdom of Rvydom that was still searching for its missing king. Rvydom’s king had no children, leaving no successor to the throne.”

“…I see. But why not find someone else to inherit the throne? If they have a royal family, why not just hand the crown over to a relative or something?”

“Rvydom is different. Didn’t I tell you before that they have special eyes? Rvydom’s royal family members are the only people in this world with violet eyes. Only those who inherit violet eyes can become king or queen—and since the disappearance of the king, no one else with violet eyes has appeared in Rvydom.”

“I see,” Yuki muttered.

Luca took a sip of his tea before continuing, “And then ten years ago the war came to a complete end. Rvydom’s missing king never reappeared, nor were there any rumors of his death.”

“Is that why your rotten Older Brother thinks I’m possibly the missing king’s child?”

“Pretty much,” Luca answered. “The reason for the war—well, there are several different reasons—is that Rvydom’s citizens excel in the healing arts, and Maruk wanted that ability for themselves. But there was much they couldn’t accept about Rvydom. Not to mention the economic issues…oh, and religious differences.”

Yuki found it odd he paused before mentioning the religious differences. “Are religious differences why Adolunde and Maruk are at war too?”

“After suppressing Rvydom, Maruk instigated a war with

Adolunde to further its reach. Maruk's forces were exhausted from the successive battles, and Adolunde was firmly against the war, so a cease-fire pact eventually formed. With the ceasefire pact over now, both sides are fumbling around for what they really want, which is why it's not a full-blown war yet," Luca spat out with disdain.

"I…see."

"And now you have come into play as a useful pawn in this war."

"Huh? Me?"

Luca looked at Yuki with a bitter expression. Everyone stared at Luca.

"No longer is there a clear reason for this war now that the ceasefire's timespan has concluded. Eight years have passed since it was first instigated after all. It's only natural past grudges have faded into obscurity. Meaning there's no just cause to rally the people behind to invade the other country—for either side.

"That's where you come in—he is trying to paint the picture that Adolunde has taken Rvydom's lost imperial princess under its wing. They'll spread the information Maruk persecuted and tortured the princess. This allows him to fight Maruk under the just cause of punishing them for what they did to a young princess, and if Adolunde wins, it will receive not only indemnities, but Rvydom as well."

"Wait—" Yuki jumped out of her seat. "What's with that logic!"

"Don't you think it's foolish? It's as worthless and foolish as you think. They want to go to war badly enough to fabricate a story."

"Why?"

The flickering lamplight danced shadows across Luca's blond hair.

"Because countries are envious of each other. That country is prospering; that country has wealth, military might, technology, and the like. And thus other countries want to steal what they envy and make it their own. They want to be the ones to advance, expand, become prosperous—human greed is limitless," Luca said, his eyes rounding with surprise.

Yuki was curious what surprised him, but he abruptly stood with a grim expression and turned for the door.

"Prince Luca?" Ain was just as confused by Luca's sudden change.

"I'm leaving. I'll be back tomorrow morning," Luca said curtly, quietly closing the door behind him.

Yuki, Ain, Nasette, and Tita were left in confusion. The heavy silence was suffocating. Nasette stood saying, "I'll check on him," and left the room.

The looming silence made it dawn on Yuki that it never even

crossed her mind to question what started the war wreaking havoc throughout Aridol. What she thought was a war occurring on some distant land and had nothing to do with her, was actually happening all around her.

And now they're telling me I might become the catalyst to make it a full-blown war? I'm not even from this world. Yet they expect me to believe I'm at the center of their problems? Her head spun from how surreal it felt.

"…Long time no see," Tita said, gazing out the window from where she sat on the bed. Yuki wondered who she was talking to, until she spotted Ain staring at Tita.

"Y-You have changed quite a lot in the five years since we last saw each other," Ain stuttered.

Tita turned her attention from outside to Ain. "Obviously—but clearly you haven't changed in the slightest, Ain."

Oh? Tita's acting weird. She smiled like a doll at me earlier. She was really nice too. But now she seems cold… Yuki thought, watching their exchange.

"If I had to say what changed, it would be you lost your cuteness and charm," Ain said. She standoffishly turned her head toward the window. "You really are as irritating as ever! Will anyone even take you as their wife?"

"Hmph, that's none of your business! Why don't you think about your own lack of wife prospects before you harp on my love life?"

"What's with that! I came all this way to look for you too!" Ain bolted from his chair. Tita spun back around and stood glowering at him.

"You came looking for me? Oh dear, what great pains you must have gone through to do that! My condolences for your time. But isn't Luca the one who came looking? You're just his chamberlain, Ain! You only came because he did!"

"It's the same thing!" Ain shouted.

"It is not the same!" Tita yelled back. "I mean haven't you always been like this, Ain? You always, always clung behind Brother and Luca and followed them everywhere!"

"The same can be said for you, Tita! You skipped your lessons to play with us."

Yuki stared in a daze at the sudden argument. She didn't understand why they started fighting. Nasette opened the door and came inside while she was still perplexed.

"Sir Nasette?"

"Yo, what's up? You can just call me Nasette—whoa, they're goin' at it again?"

"Again?"

“Ah, well, how do I explain?” Nasette scratched the back of his head, forcing an awkward smile as he watched Ain and Tita argue. “It’s one of those, ‘the usual’ situations.”

Yuki looked at Ain and Tita. They were fighting, but she didn’t find it unpleasant or scary to be in the same room. If anything, their behavior was endearing enough to make her smile.

“Oh, it’s one of those, ‘they get along so well they fight’, situations, huh?” Yuki summarized.

“We do not get along well!” Ain and Tita objected at the exact same time, leading to them berating each other with another set of sarcastic criticisms.

Chapter 15

LUCA closed the door behind him; chilly air greeted him in the hallway. He heaved a long sigh, closing his eyes as he leaned against the shut door. He bit his lower lip, trying to endure until the hatred boiling inside him cooled from a tumultuous rage to a calm simmer.

"Human greed really is limitless, isn't it?" A lyrical voice echoed in the back of his mind.

Through his closed eyes he saw her sorrowful face and sweet gesture as she smiled when she noticed his eyes on her. No matter how much he tried not to see—to forget—her dainty wrists and ephemeral smile were seared into his mind. Luca clenched his fists until his knuckles turned white. He slowly exhaled, and walked off.

"Luca," Nasette's voice called him to a halt. Luca hadn't heard the door open behind him.

Nasette is dense yet oddly sharp when it comes to these things. What is he thinking now? Luca wondered but couldn't bring himself to turn around and face Nasette.

"I'm just going for a drink," Luca said nonchalantly, hiding his inner turmoil. His real plan was to numb the pain eating at his heart—a heart cracked from many years of suffering.

"I realize I'm acting rash…. Take care of her for me while I'm gone." Luca walked off with that final remark.

What exactly was Nasette thinking as he silently watched Luca saunter off? Regardless of what his friend thought, Luca wasn't going to do anything about it. Numbing the pain came first.

***

LUCA went to the nearest tavern and easily found a seat at the counter deep within the shadowed recesses. He ordered their strongest alcohol with the ease of a regular customer. The bartender lifted an eyebrow, but he fulfilled Luca's order without comment.

The sound of drunken laughter and the groans of the overindulgent filled the room. Soft string instruments mixed with the cacophony of noise. The dim lantern light scattered around the tavern kept most of the patrons from noticing Luca.

He gulped down the amber liquid poured in his glass with a single sip. He ordered another glass—the bartender didn't bat an eye at his order this time. Luca instantly consumed the second glass as well.

The heat of the drink burned his esophagus as it sloshed mercilessly down his throat. Before he knew it, he ordered yet another glass and another. His breathing was hot and heavy. Luca didn't know whether it was due to the alcohol or something else, but he couldn't care less.

It's been a while since I last felt like this too.

In the past, when he still lacked the proper awareness of his duties and his role as a member of the royal family, he often went to taverns and drank the night away. He couldn't carelessly drown himself in alcohol in public places or in front of his men now, so he eventually abstained from alcohol.

Does this mean I've grown up now? He laughed self-derisively and downed another glass. The drink wasn't any good. He just wanted to drown himself in something strong. Something encroached on his mind. A numbing sensation spread through him.

Out of the corner of his eye he spotted a woman wearing flashy, tight-fitting clothing. She smiled seductively with scarlet lips at the various patrons. Her hair swayed invitingly, and her thighs were left bare by her short skirt. The woman eyed Luca with a predatory glint. Their eyes met. Her lips curled into a thin smile as she stood and sat beside Luca.

"Is it all right if I sit here?" she purred in a sultry tone.

Don't ask after you already sat down, Luca thought, but answered aloud, "As you like."

The pungent aroma of an overripe and rotten fruit entered his nasal cavity. *It smells so sweet it's going to put me into a drunken frenzy*. He downed yet another glass.

"I've been watching you since you came into this shop—you're quite a handsome man." She waved to the others around the tavern, "Certainly a rarity in here."

I know, he commented internally. The woman fiddled with her ecru colored drink.

"Thanks for that," he replied to her, then turned to the bartender, "Bartender, another of the same."

The woman leaned forward, closing the gap between them. "Hey, it's such a waste for a handsome man like you to be downing that cheap drink masquerading as alcohol. I know a better place than this. Won't you join me for another drink there?"

The woman gazed at him with inviting eyes, a promise of more to come should he accept. Women always invited him with such eyes

when he used to gallivant about like a free man without worry.

"I saw eyes like that just the other day," he muttered to himself. The girl—Yuki—suddenly crossed his drunken mind.

What part of her childish features gave off such bewitching charm and allure? How foolish. Luca stood, downed the drink he was handed, and gazed down at the woman. "You've got better alcohol than here, right?"

The woman's lips curled into an unsightly smile. "Of course." She wrapped her arms around his.

***

YUKI was dreaming. Dreaming about her father hugging her. She was much younger than her current age. Perhaps it was a dream of when she was five or six. Yuki was crying in her dream. She didn't tell her father why. Her small body merely overflowed with such sorrow she couldn't help crying.

"What's wrong?" her father kept asking, but she couldn't answer him.

"Yuki, your dad's eyes are creepy and gross." Her friend had said to her earlier that day at kindergarten.

Her friend's comment upset her. Yuki was sad the father she adored was called creepy and gross. And although her violet eyes were hidden behind color contacts, she felt as if her friend had said the same about her. She didn't have the courage to tell her father that her friends called him creepy. All she could do was sob in his arms.

***

IN a blink of an eye, the scene changed and Yuki was suddenly wearing her middle school uniform. The dark-red sailor school uniform didn't suit her ten-year-old appearance, making her hate uniforms. She was sitting in her classroom near the window at dusk. Through the window she absently watched the various sports' clubs going through their daily activities in the schoolyard.

An inevitable sense of emptiness consumed her. No matter the club she tried to join, she was too small to take part in any of their activities. Her sole support and comfort, archery, was taken from her too. She was barred from taking part in the middle school archery competitions and events because of her never changing stature. Before she knew it, the mere act of picking up her bow annoyed her.

Tears ran down her cheeks. By the time she turned ten, she had grown faster than everyone else and was bigger. However, before

long, her classmates grew taller and she was assaulted by an inevitable sense of impatience at her own lack of growth. Fortunately, everyone around her believed she stopped growing at a younger age than usual. Everyone lionized her as an adorable bite-sized girl.

If it had just been her height that stopped growing, she could have accepted it. However, neither her hair nor nails would grow even a millimeter. She was fine when she spent time with others. She had so much fun she didn't have the time to dwell on it. But whenever she was alone as she was now, she was filled with an indescribable sorrow.

"…That's why I don't want to be alone."

And yet, alone she remained, never moving from the window where she continued to watch people going about their normal lives.

***

THE next thing Yuki knew, she was wearing her high school uniform. The navy-blue blazer was baggy on her, but she thought the short skirt suited her. Friends not involved in clubs laughed with her after school. Every day after school they took a detour somewhere and fooled around together.

Several of her friends who participated in clubs during middle school, didn't join any in high school and were instead a part of the so-called 'Going-home Club' like Yuki. Unlike middle school, she was surrounded by people.

Yuki stayed away from home as much as possible—because when she saw her father's unusual violet eyes, she was forced to accept hers were the same. A piece of her wanted to always be around others, but deep down she really just wanted to be alone.

Spending time at cafés with her friends was fun, but there was always this encroaching feeling that her existence was utterly ambiguous. When she was alone the ambiguity intensified, rendering her unable to decide which felt worse—being with people or being all alone. In the end, she was unable to do anything but force herself to smile along with her friends. Before long, she learned to smile even when she was crying on the inside.

***

YUKI suddenly woke to tears streaming down her face. She sat up, rubbing at the tears agitating her eyes.

That dream again.

She often dreamed about her unfettered existence. She normally

ignored it, but the backlash from suppressing her anxiety brought a new wave of emotions into her dreams.

With no clocks around and no way to tell time, Yuki didn't know what time it was. Tita slept peacefully in the bed beside her. Nasette slept with his stomach bared to the world on the bed next to theirs.

Yuki had no desire to go back to sleep, so she got out of bed. She walked over to Nasette's bed and pulled a blanket over his exposed stomach. The moonlight lit the room enough for her to make out the shadowed furniture. Thirsty, she secretly snuck out of the room to find a drink.

Chapter 16

THE inn had a room separate from the main eating area where guests were free to take drinks at any time of day. The extra room's fire was always loaded with logs and equipped with an iron grate where guests could heat water or milk to make tea or other hot beverages.

Yuki zoned out as she watched the water boil over and into the fire below. The proprietress was dozing off at the counter where they had paid for their room, a small puddle of drool collecting beneath her face.

The iron teapot rattled on top of the grate. She quickly put tea leaves into a clay teapot and poured the boiling water. The inn was quiet; stillness took over once the teapot stopped whistling. Yuki almost felt as if she were taking part in some sort of sacred ritual. Pouring herself a cup of tea was just another part of the ritual.

Once the tea leaves opened after steeping in the teapot, she poured the contents into a cup. An enticing aroma wafted with the steam from the amber tea. Yuki washed the pot as she waited for her tea to cool, her mind filled with thoughts of this new world and her place in it.

Suddenly, the door flung open. Yuki jumped at the noise that shattered the serene silence surrounding her. She cautiously stuck her head out of the room and spotted Luca staggering into the inn.

What happened to him? Her mind rushed with concern as she dashed out of the room to his side. She put out both of her small arms to support his swaying body. The proprietress was sound asleep with her upper body splayed across the counter and showed no signs of waking.

"A-Are you okay?"

Was he attacked by someone? Is he hurt?

She caught a whiff of a cloyingly sweet fragrance as she checked him over for any wounds.

"Oh, it's you?" Luca put his hand on her shoulder. She looked up at him as he stared down at her.

"Are you all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Before she could respond, he continued, "Sorry. I should have kept a better eye on you. I should have dragged you into the shops with me even if you didn't want to come inside."

Yuki was happy enough she thought she could cry when she realized he worried about her during the kidnapping.

I was scared, but…

"I'm sorry, too. I should have been more cautious and aware of the fact I might be targeted."

Yuki couldn't figure out why she could be so honest with him. Her eyes welled with tears.

"…I see," Luca smiled—his eyes glazed over.

"Whoa, hey, are you sure you're okay?" She peered up at his face and caught a whiff of alcohol along with the cloyingly sweet scent.

I-Is he drunk? Witnessing Luca drunk for the first time perplexed her. *What's with this sweet scent coming from him? It makes me want to choke.*

She frowned at Luca, when he suddenly wrapped his large hand around the back of her head.

"Uwah!"

Just like that, Yuki was pulled into his arms. His hot breath tickled the nape of her neck. She got goose bumps.

“Hey! What are you doing!” His silky blond hair tickled her neck as well. Something soft pressed against her collarbone—Luca’s lips were there.

“~~!” Yuki felt the blood rushing to her face. Her breath caught as she struggled to breathe. She lifted his head off her chest on reflex. “Wh-What are you doing!”

“You looked like you were about to cry, so I thought I would comfort you…” He grinned, grabbing her hand and removing it from his face. He pulled her face back to his chest with his free hand and whispered, “What a tease you are.”

Her heart leapt at the sound of his voice. It was a tone she’d never heard before—a kind of deep smooth baritone with an underlying promise of something more. All she really understood from it was that there was a hint of passion, and that was enough to make her shudder. Her lungs were filled with a sweet, intoxicating scent that made her dizzy. There was more to his stroking her back than just a friendly gesture.

“I-I don’t need you to comfort me!”

“How cold. You were the one who invited me.”

Heat rushed to her cheeks. *I-I invited him?*

“You’re mistaking me for someone else!” She pushed him away and slapped him across the cheek.

The sound of her slap echoed through the room. Silence quickly returned. Yuki took several steps back, and placed a hand on her chest where her heart beat viciously. Luca stood stock still in the same position he was when she slapped him.

I don’t have to guess the kind of shop he went to tonight! A flushed Yuki couldn’t hide her confusion over the ambience she had no experience with.

Luca suddenly swayed violently, his knees buckling beneath him. His body lurched forward. Yuki quickly ran to him and supported him. He stared down at her with a dazed expression. It differed from his usual sullen-look—his face was completely devoid of emotion.

“Hey, come on! Get a grip on yourself. Are you okay?” Even when she spoke to him his eyes wouldn’t focus on her—he remained leaning on her in a stupor.

Just as Yuki was reaching her limit, his lips moved on his doll-like expressionless face, “No matter what…”

“What?” She didn’t catch everything he said, so she asked him again and was surprised he returned a serious answer.

“No matter what I do, you won’t disappear.” He wrapped his arms around her. Yuki couldn’t push him away this time—the arms squeezing her felt so weak and helpless.

“You are always smiling, and no matter how much I speak to

you, you won't respond."

Who is he talking about? Is he so drunk he's mistaking me for someone else? Or is he just muttering to himself?

"Please say my name…" Luca pleaded in a voice so forlorn it nearly faded as he spoke.

Yuki had never seen Luca like this before. Luca was always arrogant, egotistic, and manipulative without letting on what he was thinking. For all the weeks they had traveled together, that was the only side of him she ever saw.

Who is he talking about with such desperation? Who knows Luca in such a fragile and weakened state? To whom does he feel it's okay to show this side of himself to? Yuki thought of all the people she had met until now, but couldn't think of anyone who fit.

"Please call my name. Say, 'Luca'."

How does he expect me to do that?

For all the time they had traveled together, Yuki never once said his name aside from the time she impersonated the Legendary Witch in Fol. She didn't know how to address him after all. Should she call him 'Sir Luca'? Should she call him Prince Luca? Or should she just call him Luca? She felt as if she didn't know him well enough to ask. Her heart ached when she realized she wasn't even in a position to say his name.

Eyes enduring a great pain locked onto Yuki. She gasped. Luca looked as if he were about to cry. To anyone else he would have appeared expressionless, but to Yuki he looked like he was on the verge of tears.

"…a…Lu…ca…Luca…" She squeezed out hoarsely. She squeezed him tightly, to erase the sorrow from his face. "Luca. Luca. It's okay now."

It's okay. Don't look so sad. Yuki knew that face. *It's the face you make when you want to cry, but can't.*

It was as though she were looking in a mirror. His expression was one of someone who was in pain, but couldn't show it on the outside —thus their face stiffened into an awkward expression.

You should just let loose and cry already, she wanted to tell him and herself—she was in the same position.

"Don't cry…Luca." The arms wrapped around Yuki's back squeezed her so tight it hurt.

***

LUCA fell asleep with Yuki in his arms. Yuki was at a loss as to what to do with him, when Ain—realizing she wasn't in the room anymore —woke up Nasette and came downstairs with him. The two of them

pulled Luca off her and helped him back to their room.

"It's a bad habit of his to end up like that," Nasette said, scratching his head.

Ain heaved an exaggerated sigh. "As far as I can remember, he stopped doing it these past few years. Yuki, did Prince Luca do anything weird to you?"

"What do you mean?" She peered up at him with innocent eyes.

A red-faced Ain fumbled over his words, "Um, uh, well, uh…as long as you are okay…"

Aaah, that's what he meant. Heat rushed to Yuki's cheeks when she understood what Ain meant.

"I-I'm okay…but does he go to that kind of place often?"

"Well, how do I put it? He ends up like this when he gets into that kind of mood," Nasette said, and then added, "I think he goes whenever he wants to forget something."

Ain immediately glared at Nasette, "Can you refrain from saying such vulgar things to an impressionable Yuki?"

Yuki smiled—Ain sounded like an older brother.

"Ah, my bad," Nasette apologized, scratching his head again.

"Ahaha," Yuki found herself laughing. She was laughing, but her empty laugh was terribly devoid of emotion. Somewhere in her heart smoldered an emotion that was too much for her.

He goes whenever he wants to forget something? Like the person he mistook me for?

"Stupid Luca," Yuki muttered, leaving his room.

Chapter 17

YUKI returned to her room and crawled into bed next to a sleeping Tita. Morning arrived before she could fall asleep. Luca apparently had no recollection of the previous night, and greeted her with his usual sullen-look when she sat across from him at breakfast. Yuki was honestly relieved he didn't remember.

But how can he act so nonchalantly, like nothing happened? She didn't want him to remember what he did yet wanted him to. She realized how contradictory she was being but couldn't stop the way she felt. *At least let it bother you a little, stupid Luca.*

She glared at him with one-sided anger, when he suddenly looked at her. Their eyes met—Yuki blushed and turned away when she remembered last night. Last night was the first time a man had ever looked at her with such passion and embraced her with heated intentions.

I'm the real idiot for being the only one who got excited.

Irritated, she stuffed food into her mouth.

"Ooh, you sure can eat," Nasette commented in awe.

"Yuki, why don't you eat a little slower? The food will get stuck in your throat," Tita suggested kindly, handing her a cup of tea.

"Thanks," Yuki said, accepting the cup with a smile. She downed the contents at once.

Right, this isn't anything worth getting worked up over. No matter how they look at me, I'll only appear like a ten-year-old girl. In all actuality, they probably only see me as a girl not much past ten. That's why Luca's actions were a result of the alcohol in his system and not any actual feelings. There's absolutely no other reason for it.

Yuki let her thoughts move to other topics, such as getting used to the toiletries in a medieval world, and tried to forget about what happened last night.

***

THEY successfully found Nasette and Tita—however, from what Yuki was told, the main goal of their expedition was to rescue Nasette's father. Nasette left Adolunde for that purpose. After finishing

breakfast, the group gathered in the bigger inn room where Nasette proceeded to explain the situation.

"I told Luca the details yesterday, but my dad was captured by Maruk. The village we stopped at before coming to this town is taking care of our mom. I told her to go on to Adolunde without us, and commissioned a fast horse to take her late last night."

To summarize Nasette's story, he succeeded in rescuing his parents from Maruk, but they were relentlessly pursued causing Dante —Nasette's father—to entrust him with running away with his mother and Tita as he held back their pursuers. Nasette was forced to watch his father fight against their hunters before inevitably succumbing to capture. As much as he wanted to help, he couldn't risk his mother and sister's safety.

"I had no other choice if I wanted the girls to be safe," Nasette mumbled, hanging his head as the image of his father's capture replayed in his mind.

"Let's head farther east. It's highly likely if they kept Sir Dante alive they would take him to Cele," Luca said.

"Cele?" Yuki asked.

"Cele is a fortress city to the west of Maruk's royal capital. It has a large-scale prison for prisoners of war. It's basically a prison city," Luca explained.

"Heh," Yuki said, impressed. There were a lot of things she still didn't know about their world. "Sounds dangerous. I'd better be careful."

Things will get messy if I make the wrong move and get captured again, Yuki thought, clenching her fists and gearing herself up to take on whatever may come next.

"About that, I want you and Tita to return to Adolunde with Ain," Luca said.

"Why!" Ain bolted out of his chair, sending it skidding across the ground and into the bed.

"We can't put Yuki and Tita in any more danger than we already have," Luca said calmly.

"Why must I go back too, then?"

"It won't be safe for Yuki and Tita to return alone."

"Then send a message to the fast horsemen you dispatched to pick up Lady Anne! Tell them to stop by here and pick up Tita and Yuki on the way to Adolunde," Ain argued.

"I won't," Luca countered.

"Why not? Why will you take Nasette with you but not me?"

Ain was going to argue further, when Nasette interjected, his eyes still downcast. "Ain."

"…What?"

Nasette lifted his face and looked at Ain. He forced a smile at Ain as if he were soothing a spoiled child who wouldn't listen to reason. "You are neither a soldier nor a Knight. Understand your position," his muttered words echoed through the still room.

Ain clenched his fists.

"We're headed there to break a high-profile captive out of a reinforced prison. We're basically picking a fight with Maruk in their own territory. If our real identity is exposed, it's the same as declaring war. That's the kind of place we're breaking into."

"I know…I know that."

"Do you think we should bring women and children to that kind of place?" Luca's eyes were as cold as ice. Yuki shuddered.

Ain froze in silence. The pressure he put into his clenched fist looked painful. "Prince Luca…" Ain's rage-filled black eyes widened wildly, "What do you think of me as, Prince Luca!"

"O-Oi, Ain, chill." Nasette went to place his arm on Ain's shoulder, but Ain shoved it away.

"You are always, always like this. You decide on things without consulting me. Am I that unreliable to you? You can't place even a little trust in me?" Ain rattled on.

"…I asked you to escort them back because I *trust* you."

"Please have someone else do that. It is my duty to be by your side, Prince Luca." Ain's voice changed from resentment to sorrow. His last words faltered, as if he were saying it to himself.

Yuki sympathized with Ain as she watched him plead with Luca.

"*I really need to be by his side to stop him from doing something stupid."* Ain said to her once before. *"Prince Luca is always acting recklessly after all."* There was a glimmer in his eye when he told her.

Why can't he go? Yuki couldn't help questioning their reasoning. What they were about to do was probably more dangerous than she could ever imagine, but having not been directly exposed to the dangers of this world herself, the sheer danger of the situation felt unreal to her.

A loud sigh broke the silence. "The master you serve is ordering you to return." Yuki was shocked by how cruel Luca's voice sounded. "I won't pander to your selfishness."

Ain's black eyes rounded with shock. His tightly closed lips trembled as he endured whatever emotions were stirring inside him.

That's terrible. Something snapped inside Yuki.

"Hey! Isn't that taking it too far?" The words were out of her mouth before she could stop herself. All eyes were on her.

"You are in no position to say anything on the matter," Luca said coldly.

"I know that!"

Yuki knew she would get in their way more than anyone else—she was more than aware of her uselessness since coming to Aridol. She thought she had been of some use when Isis captured them, but the truth was the situation would have been resolved without her interference. Part of that realization tore her apart on the inside.

"Then why did you drag me this far?"

Orga would have taken care of her. Luca was the one who went as far as forcing her to contract with him to drag her away from the castle.

"After all that's happened, now you say, 'it's getting dangerous, so you best go back after all'? There's a limit to how much you can drag someone around based on what's convenient to you," Yuki berated.

Yuki knew the truth though. She knew that if she had been left behind with Orga, he would have framed her as the imperial princess of Rvydom and used her as a catalyst to instigate a full-blown war. She knew Luca took her from the castle to prevent Orga from using her as a pawn.

But this has nothing to do with that. Plus, wouldn't my going back at this point result in the same thing he was trying to prevent?

"I will allow Ain to accompany us," Yuki declared.

"Huh?"

Nasette's mouth hung open. Luca's brow knit together in a disgruntled frown as if he didn't understand what she was saying.

"I'm going with you to Cele."

"Did you hear a single word I said? You will return to Adolunde Castle," Luca ordered, glaring at her.

"Shut up. I won't pander to your selfish request."

Luca's face twitched. "Who's the one making selfish demands right now?"

"*YOUR* master is commanding you. Isn't it a retainer's duty to quietly obey orders?" Yuki pointed at Luca. The ring on her middle finger glinted.

Yes, I'm your master after all. Yuki was oddly overexcited to the point her shoulders trembled with heavy breathing.

Luca kept silent with a frown plastered on his face. Nasette was desperately trying to hide his snicker behind his hand, as if he found the whole situation hilarious.

Finally, as though he gave up, Luca sighed heavily, muttering, "Unmanageable tomboy…"

"The one who made this unmanageable tomboy their master is you, Luca. Am I wrong?" Yuki declared shifting the blame on him and standoffishly turning her face away. She was embarrassed saying his name for the first time—she didn't count the previous night, as he

didn't remember. And calling him Lukey-poo didn't count either.

She took a surreptitious glance at him—his face went rigid at her words. When their eyes met he sighed and said, "That's how it's going to be, guys. Hurry and get ready. Make sure you get everything packed; we have a long ride ahead of us."

"Thank you very much!" Ain cheered. "I will prepare the horses!" He dashed out of the room.

Chapter 18

TITA was surprised by the girl's boldness. She knew they would return to Adolunde with Ain—and how much Ain didn't want to go back. Yuki was breathing heavily as if her anger hadn't quite settled yet. Luca sighed from where he sat resting his chin on his hands and his elbows on the table.

Tita giggled. "Yuki, come now, calm down."

"Eh?" Yuki looked at Tita with a red face. She must have gotten lost in the moment with all the excitement.

"Why don't you sit? I'll pour you some tea. Okay?" Tita suggested.

Yuki passively bobbed her little head and sat across from Luca at the table.

"You want a cup too, right? Luca?"

"Yes, please," is all he answered.

"All right," Tita responded. Nasette brought a tray from the small counter on the other side of the room. "Ah, thank you."

"No problem. Was it okay to bring a cup for everyone?"

"Yes, that works just fine." Tita took the tray from Nasette and poured the pot of boiling water over the tealeaves.

Nasette was incapable of preparing tea, so he always left it to her to carefully distribute the right number of tealeaves. In the past, Nasette once prepared a cup of black tea for Tita who—much to her embarrassment—was throwing a tantrum over the lack of good tea.

Nasette prepared a cup for her, but it was so bitter she spat the boiling tea all over him. He was utterly incapable of measuring out the tealeaves and timing how long they should steep. From that point on, Nasette only helped Tita by bringing her everything to do it herself.

Tita giggled as she remembered the past.

"You really haven't changed, Luca. You are still as stubborn and dishonest about how you feel, as you were in the past." His expression was unreadable, but the clearly disgruntled air exuding from him overlapped with the Luca she knew as a child. "You should just honestly tell them you don't want to put them in danger; it would make your life far less stressful, you know?"

The black-haired girl's violet eyes blinked in surprise at Tita.

“Tita, what do you mean?”

“Hehe.”

“Tita,” Luca warned when he saw the vulpine-like smile on her face, but Tita pretended not to hear.

“You see, Yuki, in the past when everyone was still living in the castle together, the three of them were supposed to go on a hunting trip together. But Ain is the youngest of the three boys by several years, right? Well, Luca should have just told him it’s too dangerous to join them, but instead they told Ain he would ‘be in the way’ and left him behind. Things got messy afterward.” Tita clicked her nails against one of the teacups as she reminisced.

“Left behind, Ain hung out with me, but he really wanted to go hunting with them. He wanted to go hunting with the others so badly he decided to take me with him to the hunting grounds. We were severely scolded for hours by Luca and Nasette when they found us wandering around the woods.”

Yuki looked terribly apologetic after hearing how worried they were and apologized to Luca. Just when Tita thought Yuki was apologizing, she suddenly raged, “If that’s the case, why didn’t you just honestly say so! Ain was really excited and ended up following you there anyway!”

“That’s why I told him not to come with us from the start,” Luca countered.

“You didn’t explain yourself well-enough!”

Tita found their banter humorous and couldn’t hold back her giggle. The tea finished seeping, so she placed a cup in front of each of them. The subdued aroma of black tea with a hint of lavender wafted in the air.

“Ain said he wants to come because he’s worried about you, you know?” Yuki said to Luca.

“He’s always been a worry-wart. That’s why I don’t want him to know how dangerous these kinds of situations can get. He has no ability to protect himself if he gets pulled into a fight, and there’s a high chance I won’t always be able to protect him.”

Tita was surprised Luca actually revealed how he truly felt for once—she froze with her teacup halfway to her mouth. Only Yuki smiled broadly.

“…I see. I’m sorry for demanding something selfish. But I can’t stand going back and being in reach of that rotten, nasty man, so I’m coming with you either way,” Yuki stressed. Tita smiled at the girl’s strength.

It would be impossible for me to stay as strong as Yuki if I were in the same situation. Yuki said she’s from another world. I have no idea where exactly that is, but she must truly be from a distant continent if she views

Adolunde and even Aridol as different. She told me she suddenly appeared in this land with all its cultural and lifestyle differences. And Luca took her in when she had nowhere else to go.

Tita heard all about Yuki's world last night before they went to sleep. She learned Yuki was raised in a very convenient, peaceful, and prosperous country. And yet, regardless of her young age—as Tita still considered her around ten—she remained strong despite being dragged into a dreadful war.

Yuki even admitted to Tita about not knowing what war truly meant. Despite almost being used by Orga, getting kidnapped, and having her clothes ripped off her, she remained firm and unbroken. Tita envied Yuki's strength.

Tita heard something clatter against the door. She couldn't see who was on the other side of the closed door, but she had a pretty good idea. She smiled and walked over.

"You overheard, didn't you?" She quietly opened the door to reveal a red-faced Ain standing there like a statue. He held both hands over his flushed cheeks.

"No, well, I was given a letter from a messenger when I went outside, so I turned back to deliver it, and…"

The flustered Ain was a nostalgic sight to Tita. His current distress overlapped with the time he frantically tried to make excuses when Luca caught them at the hunting grounds.

"I-I had no idea Prince Luca thought that way," Ain stuttered.

"You truly are a foolish man," Tita said to him.

"W-What do you mean I'm foolish?"

Tita giggled and handed him the teacup she hadn't taken a sip from yet. Ain pouted as he took the cup off the saucer.

"You really are foolish."

Because you aren't honest with yourself, Tita thought.

Tita had been walking a dark road for a long, long time. The days she spent as a prisoner of war were grim, and every day was gray. She lived a life where she spent every moment hoping she wouldn't be persecuted yet—praying for just one more day, fully aware she would be executed if Aridol returned to all-out war.

Ever since she escaped, her eyes could see nothing other than despair. She spent every day shuddering in fear of the day their pursuers would catch them—of the day they could no longer run. She desperately scraped together the fragments of fading memories of a warm and nostalgic past, and clung to them—dreaming every single day of a time she could smile again.

The area around her eyes warmed with unshed tears. Ain placed his empty cup back on its saucer, his eyes widening when he saw Tita's face.

“Wh-Wh-Why are you crying!”

“Huh?” Unbeknown to her, tears were rolling down her cheeks. “Don’t look.” She quickly rubbed at her eyes with her sleeves.

“S-Something got in my eyes, is all! It’s nothing!” she emphasized.

I have to go somewhere dangerous again. The flustered young man in front of her was the one bringing her to that dangerous place.

But we don’t know whether anywhere is truly safe for us in the first place. If we are going to be pursued no matter where we go, at the very least I want to stay with the one responsible for those gentle memories. Perhaps I am the fool for thinking so?

Chapter 19

THE contents of the letter Ain received from the messenger were despairing—it was enough to interfere with the group's plans to rescue Dante.

"It says to return," Luca announces, putting the letter away.

"Return? As in return to Adolunde?" Yuki asked.

"Yes," Luca replied curtly.

"Why do we have to go back? Aren't you heading to Maruk to save Sir Dante? Besides—"

Besides, you're the Fourth Prince, Luca. Isn't it acceptable if you're absent from government affairs? Yuki kept the rest of her musings to herself.

"Because I have limited responsibilities. I, at least, sent word on ahead to Brother about my plans to rescue Sir Dante, but apparently my dear brother is dissatisfied with my plans," he smiled dryly at his brother's response.

"What's with that! Why would he abandon Sir Dante to his fate? I can't believe this!" Yuki exclaimed indigently.

"Ah, well, that's because my dad was originally from Rvydom. He was captured by Maruk's forces when he tried to seek asylum in Adolunde. So he's not worth much to Adolunde," Nasette filled in.

"But why would your rotten brother explicitly order you to return? That's just weird. He didn't care what you did until now," Yuki observed.

Luca quoted from the letter, "It mentioned, 'I want the Violet ranked Knight Lucat to properly lead a division of Adolunde's army into war.' I hate to admit it, but his reasoning doesn't leave room for refusal."

"Don't let it get to ya," Nasette's cheery voice broke the gloom in the air. "I can make do on my own. I'm happy as long as you guys are willing to look after Tita and our mom. Go back, Luca."

"No, it's fine. Ain, send a message letting them know I will inspect the situation in Maruk and inform him of the circumstances."

"Yes, sir. As you command!"

"…I appreciate the help, but are you sure about this?" Nasette asked, hesitant about the potential fallout.

"I don't mind. I'm indebted to Sir Dante as well—he's like a

father to me," Luca said. Yuki thought she saw a slight smile on his lips.

Yuki was shooed out of the room to start packing, while the others broke up and prepared for the journey ahead. The group set about packing their belongings and gathering supplies for the long journey to Cele.

***

"GOOD grief, Yuki. You still aren't ready?" asked an impatient Tita peering in from the doorway.

"Titaaa," Yuki implored on the verge of tears amid a pile of scattered luggage. Several hours passed since the letter arrived; everyone finished readying for their departure hours ago. Only Yuki remained, and she was embarrassed to be the one holding everyone up.

Tita sighed. "…I thought this was going to happen."

Yuki ended up in this state every time she traveled to a new town or city—she was terrible at all tasks revolving around packing.

"Perhaps I should have checked on you sooner," Tita muttered, staring down at the large pile of scattered clothes and random stuff.

Ain happened to overhear Tita and Yuki arguing when he passed by the room. He quietly slipped away, a warm smile pulling at his lips.

"Yuki! Paper is heavy when you start gathering it in bulk!"

"But look! The drawings came out so pretty on these pages! That's why I want to keep it all as a memento—"

"Yuki!"

"Aaaaaaah, geez, I hate packing!" Yuki's complaints echoed into the hallway of the inn, drawing snickers from the group.

***

"WE have a long journey ahead of us, I hope everyone is well rested." Yuki groaned at Luca's words as he helped her into the horse saddle outside the inn they had been staying at. Their luggage and supplies were already packed.

"No more soft bed…"

"…Or warm sheets."

Tita and Ain whined at the back of the group.

"It's not going to be that bad—right?" Luca turned away from her pleading puppy dog eyes clicking his tongue as he took the lead out of town, the others followed with the occasional grumble from Ain.

***

YUKI rubbed her thigh and leg muscles. They were taking a brief stop on the side of the road for her and Ain, who were both less experienced with horseback travel over rugged terrain.

"Oh, a good omen," Nasette commented, crouched over where the horses were grazing.

"Huh?" Yuki looked past his shoulder to see an eight-leaf clover. "Oh, it's good luck?"

Ain snorted, "It means interesting things will happen—not necessarily good or bad things."

"Yuki, Ain, break's over!" Luca ordered mounting his horse, hand outstretched for Yuki.

Rubbing her aching legs one last time, she whimpered, "Already?"

Ain didn't look any better as they rode on. They weren't going to stop again until they found a place to camp for the night.

***

THWACK. A dull thud resounded when the arrow pierced vertically into the distant tree.

"……"

Yuki was speechless as she looked up at the young man who shot the arrow.

"I didn't think you would be skilled in archery too…" She quietly grumbled about princely knights being perfect at everything.

After they chose to set up camp on the roadside after a day of traveling, Yuki decided it was the perfect time to practice archery. Ever since defeating General Isis, Yuki practiced whenever she got the chance, hoping she could use her skills to help Luca and the others again.

She loved camping outdoors because it gave her the time and space to practice. A part of her was also looking forward to stopping in the town Ain said they would reach tomorrow, because a bed was always more comfortable than the ground.

She always informed the others when she was going to practice and pointedly ignored Luca's scoff as he continued to treat her like a child, saying it was too dangerous for her to go alone. Yuki stoically ignored him when he chose to tag along with her this time.

"Pull it closer to your chin," Luca advised, watching Yuki practice quietly on her own.

Yuki was confident in her archery skills. She lovingly practiced archery since the day she first picked up an old string bow as a child.

So she was rightfully disgruntled when the amateur Luca gave her advice on how to shoot.

"Why don't you show me how to do it then?" she spontaneously challenged him.

Thwack. Another dull thud echoed from the tree.

"Luuuuuca! I challenge you! Right here and now! I have targets set up over there; let's see who can hit them faster!"

Luca grinned. He was having enough fun he actually considered joining her for practice more often, especially with how tedious their travels could get. They would be departing again at first dawn, so he wanted to enjoy every moment he could walk on his own two legs.

***

"AIN, that's a really pretty crystal," Yuki commented, peering around Ain's back at the crystal he was polishing on his lap in front of the fire while carefully adding ingredients to the pot of simmering rabbit stew. Nasette and Tita were by some trees tending to the horses and Luca was collecting water while Ain and Yuki made dinner.

"Oh, thank you. I received this from Prince Luca."

"Heh. Luca's pretty nice, huh?"

Ain smiled proudly, "He is! Prince Luca occasionally has these really generous moments!" The pretty indigo blue crystal rolled across Ain's hand. "I used to have a green crystal, but I lost it at some point and Prince Luca gave this one to me when I was really beating myself up over the loss."

"Heh, he's considerate, huh?"

Yuki and Ain smiled at each other. Tita and Nasette overheard them from where they cared for the horses and whispered to each other.

"Brother, is he possibly talking about that time?" Tita whispered to Nasette.

"Yeah. I woulda never thought he still hadn't realized the truth," Nasette whispered back.

Several years earlier a young Luca and Nasette were fencing inside Ain's room. One of their jabs accidentally hit the crystal, breaking it.

"…It was old," whispered Luca as he walked past the siblings carrying their replenished water bags.

***

ANOTHER day of travel on horseback ended in a small town off the

trail. They gathered any necessary supplies and settled in at the only inn in town, which was more of a house than an inn. Luca gallantly went to the baths at the end of the habitual after dinner teatime with the others, leaving Nasette, Ain, and Yuki to clean up.

"…He is the same as always," Tita suddenly muttered. "Plus, he kept piling it up nonchalantly."

"Yeah, he hasn't changed," Nasette said, smiling dryly.

"Indeed, he has not changed. I can understand your shock," Ain nodded.

"Huh? What are you guys talking about?" Yuki asked, her cluelessness plainly displayed on her face.

"You didn't notice?" Tita asked exasperated. "We're talking about Luca. L.U.C.A. You didn't see what he did?"

Yuki flinched when Tita leaned in close, her nose inches away from Yuki's.

Did Luca do something weird? Did anything strange happen between dinner and now? Hmm… Yuki mulled over what it might be.

Tita sighed, "Luca put five sugar cubes into his tea."

"Ah."

Yuki was shocked when she saw Luca place five sugar cubes into his tea for the first time at Fol, but it no longer felt strange to her after witnessing him do it constantly since then. Now it would be more shocking if he didn't put sugar in.

"He drinks something like that with a straight face, making it impossible to comment on it," Tita sighed again and started helping the others clean up.

***

"YUKI, wake up!"

"Huh? Whaz goin' on?" Yuki said, blinking away the sunlight in her face. She blushed when she noticed the sizable pool of drool on Luca's back. Riding every day for hours straight took its toll on her, so she sat behind Luca in the less dangerous areas for a change in sitting position. There was only so much to do, and after the same scenery grew dull, naps were a way to pass the day faster.

Tita giggled off to the side where she rode behind Nasette, "Endure a little longer, Yuki. We will be sleeping in a bed tonight!"

"The tavern we are staying at is just ahead," Luca said, leading the way.

Ain moaned in relief, climbing off his horse, "I don't think I will ever be able to ride without being in pain."

"I just want to sleep in a nice bed, with warm sheets," Tita said.

Yuki couldn't help but agree completely with Tita, "A bed sounds

nice." The group hurriedly made their way into the tavern taking rooms after Luca secured a stable for their horses. Yuki collapsed into her bed, relishing the soft comfort of a surface that wasn't rock solid.

***

AIN sneezed loudly. He awoke to the cold and a second sneeze. Ain groaned as he took in Nasette curled around all the blankets on his side of the bed. They finally got a nice inn room with a warm bed, and Nasette stole all the blankets.

"Nasette, um, it's cold so please give me back my share of the blankets." Nasette's back was facing Ain, so he gently shook his shoulders, but there was no reaction from the drooling man.

"Nasette," he grumbled, shaking him harder.

"Mnnnnn…." Nasette moaned, tugging the blankets closer.

I won't get anywhere at this rate. Guess I'll just put my mantle on…

Ain sluggishly climbed out of bed, when Tita abruptly sat up in the bed across from his.

"Ah, sorry. Did I wake you?" Ain whispered to Tita.

Tita stared in a daze at Ain. "What's wrong? Did Brother…steal the blankets again?"

"Ah, yeah."

Oh yeah, this has happened before. Nasette has a bad habit of stealing the blankets from the people sleeping near him.

Tita stirred and slowly moved around in bed. Her fluffy chestnut hair was disheveled from just waking up. Ain strained a smile and grabbed his mantle off the back of one of the chairs surrounding the table.

"…Mn."

Ain heard sheets rustle when he returned to his bed. He glanced over at Tita who had moved over to the other side of her bed, opening a big enough space for another person to lie down. She was patting the open space on her bed suggestively.

"…Wha—"

Tita scowled at Ain from where she laid sprawled out on the bed. "Mn!"

"Wh-What are you thinking!" he yelled before catching himself and lowering his voice.

Tita didn't take well to his rebuke, and glowered at him. "You'll catch a cold!" She whacked the opened space harder as though saying sleep here and grunted, "Mn!"

I hear nothing. I see nothing. I hear nothing. I see nothing! Ain chanted in his mind like a protective spell.

"Ain!" Tita shouted like a child throwing a tantrum.

“Aaaah, fine! You’ll be satisfied if I lay next to you, right!” Ain shot out of bed and crawled into the space next to Tita. He scooted as close to the edge as possible and turned his back to her.

“Mn. Hehe.” He heard her giggling happily behind him.

“D-Don’t blame me for this later!”

Ain put space between him and Tita. She must have been cold, because she scooted over to him and cuddled up against his back.

“Wha—” Ain froze in place like that for the rest of the night.

***

YUKI went to the room Nasette, Tita, and Ain were sleeping the following morning to join the group before heading off to breakfast.

“Good morning, Tita. What were your thoughts for breakfast—whoa, Nasette…”

Nasette was sprawled with his arms and legs wide open across the bed. Being the beginning of spring, it was still cold out, yet his abdomen was barely covered by the blankets.

“Good grief,” Yuki sighed. She learned just how bad Nasette’s sleeping habits were in the few days they had spent together. She went over to his bed and pulled the blanket up to his shoulders.

Weird. Ain’s not in bed with him. I wonder whether he’s up already.

Yuki finished pulling all the blankets onto Nasette and looked toward Tita’s bed—her jaw dropped.

"……" Ain and Tita were sleeping while embracing each other. "...Huh?"

Tita was sleeping with her face buried in Ain's chest. Ain's arms were wrapped tightly around her back.

Yuki returned to the room she was sharing with Luca next door and smacked him awake before dragging him to the room where everyone else was sleeping.

"Hey, does this mean they did that, you know…that thing? Where they do you know what," Yuki whispered to a sleepy Luca, as they spied on Tita and Ain.

"Children shouldn't have such imaginative delusions," Luca responded. Yuki immediately punched him in the shoulder. Luca sighed, disgruntled Yuki woke him up for no reason. "A half-asleep Tita most likely invited Ain to bed with her after Nasette stole the blankets."

What's with this situation?

"N-No way. I don't believe it. I mean Tita is of a marriageable age…"

"As a kid Tita always had a bad habit of doing things half-asleep and not remembering the next morning. If she's gotten over that habit, then it's likely she did what you imagined earlier. Either way, leave them be," Luca said, groggily returning to their room.

***

LATER that morning, Yuki sprung to her feet when she heard a scream next door.

"Why! Why is Ain sleeping next to me?" Tita screamed.

"Like I said, you invited me to sleep next to you, Tita!" Ain tried to explain.

"…! I did not!" she protested.

"You did too! Besides, you're the one who clung to me!"

Yuki sat on her bed in shock over the conversation she could hear through the wall separating her from theirs. She stared at the wall.

"See, I told you so," Luca said, smiling triumphantly as he sipped on the tea he just plopped five sugar cubes into.

***

NASETTE sat on the side of Tita's bed after Ain stormed off and she angrily went back to sleep.

Luca sauntered into the silent room. Staring at Tita sleeping in

bed he asked, "…How old is Tita this year?"

"Fifteen," Nasette quietly replied, watching her resting face.

"She was barely ten the last time you saw her. She was really tiny at the time. She's gotten pretty," he said sounding like a father.

"Fifteen, huh?" Luca commented, eying one particular location.

"Right? Hasn't she gotten big?" Nasette chuckled.

"Yeah, but certain areas didn't develop as well," Luca said with a mortified expression.

Nasette instantly stopped laughing. After a moment's pause, he sighed. "Yeah…"

Luca wasn't sure whether Nasette was agreeing with him or his sigh meant he was lamenting Tita's lack of development in that one particular area.

***

"AAH! They all look delicious…" Yuki and Tita exclaimed to each other, entranced by the delicacies on the table.

They stopped at the local bakery the following morning. Stopping in places like this helped with their morale and kept the girls happy. The bakery sold three different types of dessert. The first was a white pudding topped with a fluffy cream. The second was a cake made of sweet-smelling batter and topped with a red jam. The final dessert was a tart topped with many different fruits.

All three desserts looked delectable, and the girls couldn't pick just one. They decided to order two of the desserts to share. Well, that was until they were hit by a craving to try the third one as well. The desserts they saw the other customers eating all looked so delicious.

"Which should we choose…" the girls asked each other, unable to make a decision and order for a long time. Ain and Nasette watched them from a corner of the shop, weary of the sickeningly sweet scent wafting around them, while Luca remained expressionless from beginning to end.

Apparently, there was no such thing as an option to pick just two desserts when there are more than two to choose from. Surely, the expressionless Luca was the one who contemplated which to pick the most. In the end, Yuki and Tita noticed Luca's desire through his expressionlessness and invited him to order the third dessert so the three of them could share. Perhaps stopping in the bakery was not just for the girls, but Luca's sake too.

Arms laden with sweets, the group remounted their horses, and continued their journey. The sweets put Yuki in a good mood and made her think maybe this journey would be a little less traumatizing than when they first set off from Fol. Smiling she smacked Luca's hand

as he tried to snatch another of the sweet rolls from her basket.

***

BLOOD coated the ground, beast and man lie where they had been slain. Their innards spilled across the road; some still had spears sticking out of their corpses.

"There are more over here!" Nasette called out, his sword held at the ready. Ain, Tita, and Yuki remained on their horses while Luca and Nasette checked over the slaughtered caravan.

Luca grunted checking the side of the road Nasette pointed out. He turned away to enter one of the shattered carriages.

Nasette followed, only to rush back out of the carriage paler than Yuki normally saw the jovial man.

"I hate it when there are women and children…" Nasette hissed coming back to the horses.

"No survivors?" Ain asked, with a look of sorrow in his features.

"None, there is nothing more we can do here," Luca answered from where the carriage began to smoke.

Nasette remounted his horse behind Tita, "At least the women and children will get a proper burial."

Tita buried her head into Nasette's back, soft whimpers emanating from her hidden face. "And so the war claims even more victims seeking sanctuary."

***

TITA sang under the starless night sky. Since long ago, she always sang this song whenever someone died. It was a very gentle song in the ancient language.

"Grant them eternal rest. Please illuminate them with ceaseless light."

Tita's sorrowful song echoed through the night.

Ain opened the window to his room and listened to Tita's song.

When did I last hear this song?

In the past, Tita sang the song every single day. Five years ago, the war that had continued for three straight years ended with a ceasefire when Adolunde's queen died. Dante was captured when he tried to flee from Maruk and became a prisoner of war unable to escape Maruk. Of course, that was when Tita left.

Nasette and Tita had stayed in Adolunde mainly because Nasette was living at the Knight Training Camp quarters. Tita stayed in a boarding school for noble girls. However, when she learned her

parents had become prisoners of war, she said, “I will stay with Father and Mother.”

She sang like this on that day too. Ain had opened his window and listened to her secretly back then as well. He secretly believed Tita was better at singing than any of the girls at the boarding school. But perhaps out of consideration for her position as a high ranking noble, she rarely sang in front of others.

Thus she sang under the starless night sky, shedding her tears for all who lost their lives this day.

Chapter 20

AFTER what felt like months of travel, they finally arrived at Cele. The city was surrounded by a series of fortified walls, reminiscent of *baumkuchen* with Cele at its center.

What a strange city, Yuki thought as they passed through the first set of checkpoints. After passing the outer wall, Yuki was introduced to what she could only describe as a small shantytown of hovels packed tightly together against another set of walls, which required passing through additional armed checkpoints and another set of walls with slightly improved shantytowns.

"Cele was originally a small fortress town. Time passed and the town ended up getting bigger than the walls, so they made another set of walls when people moved outside of the first set. The town's population grew again, so yet another set of walls was built around them. The pattern continued until they ended up with all these fortifications. The walls you see falling apart are remnants of the first set," Ain explained when Yuki asked him about the city's odd design.

Every part of the city was gray—the stone walls were a dirtied gray; so were the buildings, and even the people in the city were tinged in gray soot.

"…What a glum city," Yuki muttered.

"It is," Luca agreed from where he held the horse's reins behind her. She looked over her shoulder at him, surprised he responded.

"Cele is a fortress turned into a prisoner of war camp. Most of the people residing here are either prisoners, vagrants, people released from prison, or former criminals. The majority of former criminals often commit other crimes after being freed. They are pointlessly forced to make these fortress walls when they aren't serving some other form of penal or military servitude."

"…You're well-informed," Yuki commented.

"I happen to be royalty," Luca snorted.

Yuki's height put Luca's chin against the top of her head when they rode on the horse together. She often worried her head might bump into his chin. Ain rode his own horse and Tita rode with Nasette behind them.

"Hey, how are you going to rescue Sir Dante?" Yuki asked Luca.

"Good question," he responded, falling silent. Silence spread

among the group. They rocked on the cantering horse's back. In their silence, Yuki heard the horse's hooves clatter against the gray stone and the sound of stone being cut somewhere in the distance.

"We could use force to break him out, but our current party is not really suited to fighting. Bribery may be best. Well, our current situation was unexpected after all. I'll talk it over with Nasette later," Luca finally admitted.

"Heh," Yuki answered absently. "By the way, what kind of relationship do you have with Nasette and Ain? I know you're childhood friends, but you're a prince, right? How does that work, Luca?"

Can a prince really remain friendly with his childhood friends after all this time? Yuki wondered.

"…What does that have to do with anything? I don't understand why you're asking about it," Luca said above her head.

"D-Does it have to matter? I'm curious!" Yuki grumbled.

"Why are you getting so angry?"

Her cheeks flushed red. She wasn't sure why she was getting so worked up over the topic either.

"Ain's family line has served as Adolunde's strategists for generations. He's their youngest child and the closest in age to me, so he was assigned as my attendant," Luca answered.

Yuki recalled how Ain took care of everything related to her during her short stay at Adolunde Castle.

"Nasette is an orphan. He was taken in and raised by Sir Dante."

"Oh? Didn't you say Sir Dante was from Rvydom?" Yuki asked.

"Yeah," Luca muttered. "Sir Dante was a soldier in Adolunde's military, but he was born in Rvydom. When Rvydom and Maruk went to war, he resigned from Adolunde's forces to join Rvydom's reinforcements. Tita and Nasette moved to Rvydom with him when he went. Nasette is currently a member of my Imperial Guard."

"I see," Yuki said, automatically comprehending how the four of them kept their friendship until now.

***

THE kind of people lying on the side of Cele's narrow roads existed in the city Yuki grew up in too. They woke and slept within various train station premises, occasionally giving off a terrible, unknown stench and occasionally smelling of alcohol. Clad in tattered clothing, they mingled into the splendor of the city.

Is it hypocritical to want to do something charitable for them? Yuki contemplated against her better judgment every time she saw people like them. If she could do something for them, she wanted to. She

wanted to share her food, drinks, entertainment, and clothes with them. She was painfully aware she was in neither the position nor place to give freely of her limited supplies to others.

"Don't stare," Luca chided her from behind.

"…I know," she said, her attention still on them.

Are they cold? Are they starving? Before she realized it, she was glancing around at the disheveled people again.

"I wish I could do something for them," she murmured.

"Don't even think of giving something out of charity," Luca reprimanded.

"Why not?" she responded unknowingly agitated.

"They're not as pitiful as you make them out to be."

"…What do you mean by that?"

He glanced down at her with the eyes of someone looking at a naïve child.

"Then what would you do?" Yuki added pushing through her agitation.

Luca's face was as unreadable as ever. Yuki wondered if it was just her imagination his expression softened. They slowly swayed on the horse's back as they continued on their way. The heat she felt against her back seeped away in the cool air.

"If you truly pity them and want to have mercy on them, you make the country prosper. In doing so, not as many people will end up this way," Luca said in an incredibly gentle tone.

***

AFTER traveling to the deepest part of the city, Yuki noticed people gathering in a plaza on her right.

I wonder what they're doing. Is it some kind of event or entertainment?

The majority of larger towns and cities they passed through usually had some kind of event or fair going on in the town plaza. Yuki loved watching how lively people were as they took part in the festivities. She couldn't see what was going on too well from where she sat in front of Luca. She turned in the saddle and went to stretch her head over Luca's arm to get a better view, but he lifted his arm to block her line of sight.

"What are you doing? I can't see," she complained.

"Are you mistaking that for a bazaar? They're holding an execution."

"Execut—" Yuki was at a loss for words at the sound of the unfriendly word.

Luca sighed, "I told you—this is a city for criminals."

A piercing scream came from the plaza—a man's hoarse shriek echoed through the area. The intensity of his scream seemed to shake the air itself. A part of her trembled at the noise, and a sense of dread filled her as she took in the city's people once more. Their dour hopelessness, the anguish in their eyes…

"…!" Yuki grimaced at the sound of another man's shrieking. The screams raised and fell over and over again, then stopped abruptly. Silence returned to the plaza once more, only broken by the sound of stone being cut. People scattered in different directions from the plaza —a sign the execution had ended. She squeezed her eyes shut and leaned against Luca's warm chest for reassurance. Yuki covered her ears with both hands until she was inside the inn.

Chapter 21

NASETTE paid for a single large room when they arrived at the shadiest inn Yuki had seen—and she had stayed at all sorts of inns since arriving in Aridol.

"It's dangerous, so it's best we stay together," Nasette told her when she asked him why he only got one room.

This was a first—they always borrowed two rooms, regardless of how dangerous the region was. The reasoning for two rooms, even in insecure areas, was if one room got invaded, they could escape to or receive reinforcements from the second room.

Once the room was secure, Nasette and Luca took turns checking out the city. They never said what they were doing, but Yuki was fairly sure they were looking for clues and how best to proceed with Dante's prison break. Yuki had nothing better to do in the interim, so she took the chance to continue her language lessons with Tita and Ain.

"I'm impressed you can study under these circumstances," Ain praised her.

I'll be crushed under the weight of worry if I don't have something to take my mind off things, Yuki thought.

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"HMM," Yuki murmured for what seemed like the thousandth time. Tita smiled at her from where she sat on the other side of the table. "Why do you read it this way? I don't get it…"

"Haha, you have to learn the basics through rote memorization or you won't grasp the inner meanings down the line."

The book splayed on the table in front of her was filled with lists of letters and words like nothing she had ever seen before. Apparently, Aridol shared a common written language, but Yuki saw no commonality between Aridol's language and any of the languages she knew on Earth.

Now that I think about it, Papa had a hard time with the Japanese writing system too; especially kanji. Maybe this is why, Yuki thought, holding her head.

"Hmmm," she murmured again. Everything looked the same to her. One symbol had a swish, but the next had an almost identical curl.

As Yuki compared the bizarre letters, Tita smiled at her and said, "Why don't we leave it at this for today?"

"What? But—"

"It's okay, it's okay."

Did Tita run out of patience teaching a slow learner like me? That fear coursed through Yuki for a moment.

"…Will you teach me again tomorrow?" she asked timidly.

Tita smiled sweetly, "Of course."

Thus concluded another day of studying together—something Yuki wouldn't come to regret until much later.

***

EVERY night Yuki and Tita would prepare food and tea for Luca and Nasette who came back to the room exhausted. Several days passed before Ain started disappearing for long excursions too. The girls had no idea where Ain and Nasette went together, but they always came back weary and worn-out.

Yuki thought their prison break attempt must be something more difficult than she could ever imagine. Even after she and Tita crawled into bed together, the three men would argue over a map they spread out in the faint lamplight.

I wish there was something I could do to help. Tita must be thinking the same thing.

They often looked at each other wide-awake in the middle of the night. Occasional screams echoed through the city late at night. They would both wake up, and when their eyes met, they gripped each other's hands and squeezed their eyes shut to make it through another harrowing night.

Being unable to help is the most painful thing of all.

Yuki was impatient too. She had nothing other than clothes and her few belongings. She came with Luca and Nasette because of her own selfish demands, but it was too late to regret it. There was no going back at this point. They could only move forward until the day they managed to free Dante.

They spent every day in melancholy. Weeks passed with Yuki and Tita never seeing the outside of their room. Before she realized it, Yuki memorized enough words to read and write in Aridol's language. It was around then when that fateful night finally arrived.

***

"WE managed to secure a path into the prison at dawn tomorrow," Luca announced matter-of-factly, his face shadowed in the gloom of the dim lamplight. "We provided a good sum of money to several of the guards to allow us to meet with the prisoners of war and hand them food first thing in the morning, before the sun clears the horizon."

His handsome face was sunken with lost vitality. He looked as if he had lost quite a bit of weight. Whatever he had to do to make this possible had taken its toll on him mentally and physically. Ain and Nasette stayed quiet, leaving the explanation to Luca.

"The problem is they won't allow men into the prison out of concern they are planning a prison break. So, we need your help now. We procured the prison cell's key from another source, but we can't get inside to open it."

Surprised by Luca's request, Yuki looked at Ain and Nasette—their faces contorted in barely restrained regret.

I see. They were desperately searching for another way this whole time, Yuki thought. Even if they found another way, they didn't have much time left. They had to get back to Adolunde soon, or the war would progress so far they wouldn't be able to go back.

Yuki clenched her fists. She planned on being the one to go with them. She wasn't originally from their world, so even if she were captured and killed, it wouldn't be a great loss to these people.

Worst-case scenario, I'll pretend to be the Legendary Witch again.

"With that said, we'll have Tita come with us," Luca announced. The room fell deathly silent; the gloom usually following a funeral hung in the air.

What? They picked Tita? Yuki was taken aback. She never thought they would pick Tita. She glanced at Tita who sat beside her bewildered.

"…I understand," Tita said, looking at Luca with terribly frightened yet resolute eyes.

"Hey. Hold on a minute."

Wasn't Tita heading to Adolunde to seek asylum? To escape from whatever nightmare she had been put through as prisoner of war? They took her under their wing to keep her out of danger, so why are they purposely tossing her into the lion's den? Even if all she has to do is open the door, the guys didn't explain what would happen after the door was opened.

Yuki knew they didn't tell them because it was clearly something they couldn't explain—it would scare the girls too much. She overheard them say the prison cells were deep inside the fortress.

“Why? Why did you pick Tita? I can’t accept that,” Yuki objected.

“Yuki,” Tita called. Yuki turned to Tita and saw the hand she clenched over her chest was trembling. “It’s fine.”

“But—”

Tita shook her head with downcast eyes. “If that is Prince Lucat’s command, I shall obey.”

Prince Lucat. Those were not the words of the childhood friend who always called the prince, Luca—no, they were the words of a loyal citizen following the orders of their ruler.

“I’m sorry to ask you to do this when we know how dangerous it will be,” Luca apologized.

“Do not be. I will execute the orders you have honored me with to the best of my ability,” Tita said formally, bowing her head.

The fifteen-year-old girl smiled as she trembled. Her smile was beautiful like a doll’s—and tragic. She was smiling despite how frightened she was. Her smile squeezed Yuki’s heart. She could almost hear the agonizing screams from across the city, echoing in her head again.

Since the day she heard the first man’s piercing cry at the execution when they entered Cele, it haunted and gnawed at her mind. The plaza filled with a crowd of people; the gray city; people wandering around with dead eyes. Was Tita going to be executed in a place like that too?

“We can’t let that happen,” Yuki muttered unconsciously. Once the words were out of her mouth she declared it again, louder this time, “We can’t let that happen.”

Tita stared at Yuki for a moment before smiling pitifully.

“Thank you, Yuki. But it’s fine.”

“It is not fine!”

It’s not fine! It’s not fine! Tita was with me whenever I was worried! She smiled and called me, ‘strong’! The sweet, innocent Tita is going somewhere she might die. I’m certain she’s aware of the fact she could die. That’s why she can smile like this.

“You’re only fifteen, Tita! It’s too cruel to put a fifteen-year-old girl in that kind of situation!” Yuki glared at Luca.

“Then what about you? You’re a brat who’s barely ten,” Luca countered.

“I’m eighteen!” she proclaimed, striking a daunting pose.

Aaah, I let it slip finally. But that doesn’t matter anymore.

“Choose me. Choose me, a girl from another world who can take on the guise of the Legendary Witch. You don’t have to put Tita in danger.”

Everyone present was speechless. Clearly, no one believed her

when she told them she was eighteen.

“Doesn’t it work out well this way? If I die, one of the possible catalysts for full-blown war will disappear…. Besides, there’s a chance I might return to my world if I die in this one, right?”

Yuki knew she most likely would not return to her world if she died in this one—nothing was ever that easy.

“Yuki,” Tita whispered. Worry etched her beautiful face as she watched Yuki. She was significantly taller than Yuki, but she looked like a very fragile child to Yuki.

“I’m sorry for keeping my age a secret. As you can see, my appearance is stuck this way, so I didn’t think anyone would believe me anyway,” she grinned and turned to the men in their group. “With that said and done, take me with you. I, at least, have confidence in my skill with a bow and arrow. If you won’t listen to my request, I’ll make it a command.”

Her grin was perfect and filled with the self-assurance of someone who didn’t mind sacrificing themselves.

Chapter 22

BENEATH a luminescent starry sky, the lamplight flickered unreliably. Yuki stared intently at the shadows cast by the lamp.

I asked for something selfish again. Just thinking about it made her want to hide under the bedcovers, but she didn't regret it. *I never want to see Tita forced to make such a heartrending expression again.*

Tita was the first female friend Yuki made in Aridol. She was a kind, gentle, and fragile girl who seemed like she would vanish with the cruel winds of this world. Tita already went to bed under the watchful eye of the others.

Yuki was on top of the inn's roof. It took a lot of effort to climb up to the roof with a lamp in one hand, but the view of the twinkling stars made it all worth it. She put the flickering lamp—its candlelight threatening to vanish with the wind—aside and laid back on the rooftop. The triangular roof had just the right slant for a perfect view of the whole night sky. The massive fortress walls hid the city; she could only make out the candlelight of nearby buildings and the occasional lantern of patrolling guards.

A sense of serenity and calm settled on Yuki. She was going somewhere far more dangerous than when she entered Fol with Luca, and yet she didn't feel terrified.

Open the prison cell and make a run for it. Talk about a piecemeal plan. Yuki racked her mind for a better plan, but she knew as long as they were in enemy territory without a spy on the inside, there was no way for them to go about this inconspicuously.

She shut her eyes. When she first arrived in Aridol, the end of winter was nigh and spring was sweeping in. The cool spring breeze once rustled her hair, but now the season had changed to summer—several months had passed. According to Tita, it was now the Season of Leaves, a season where the entire continent was covered in verdant leaves.

Yuki reminisced about Earth. *What have my parents been doing since they chucked me off the balcony? How is Japan handling my disappearance when I never showed up for university? Are they saying I'm missing? That I was spirited away? An unexplained disappearance? Kidnapping? The rumors won't be pretty.*

Are my friends doing well? How about Aika who was all fired up

about her college debut? Or what about Rin who was concerned about being in a long-distance relationship with her boyfriend?

Yuki thought of her many different friends whose memory grew hazier with each passing day. What did they think of Yuki and her disappearance? Had they forgotten her as they pursued their new lives? Tears welled, and she fought back a sniffle.

"Doesn't it work out well this way? If I die, one of the possible catalysts for full-blown war will disappear… Besides, there's a chance I might return to my world if I die in this one, right?"

Yuki was the one who admitted her lack of value, and yet the words hurt her. They weighed heavily on her mind.

I wanted them to at least deny it a little bit. I don't care if it's a lie; I wanted someone to say they needed me.

"That's not it," she muttered to herself.

I really just wanted to be useful. I wanted to be useful and have there be meaning to why I'm in this world—even if it results in my own death.

"…What's not it?"

Surprised by the sudden voice, Yuki opened her eyes to see Luca easily climb onto the rooftop.

"…Luca." She kind of hated how easily he got onto the roof after how hard it was for her.

"You really are an unmanageable tomboy." He brushed his hair back in irritation. The moonlight illuminated his golden locks as they blew in the gentle night breeze. Yuki immediately averted her eyes when she realized she was captivated by the sight.

"Shut up," she spun away, her eyes catching view of several vagrants clad in tattered clothes sleeping on the ground below. The sight brought on an intense sadness. "…I might have become like that too."

Luca must have guessed what she meant. "You may very well have. But your eye color is unique. I think you would've been captured and sold long before you became a vagrant stuck begging for scraps," he said something cruel as bluntly as ever. But what he said was as close to the truth as you could get, which made Yuki smile.

"Sold? You mean to a perverted fox like Isis?"

"Either that or to the person a certain someone likes to call rotten and evil."

"You mean to your endearing brother?" she asked.

"Or to someone in a similar position," he laughed.

"If I have to get picked up by someone either way, I'd want to be picked up by some kingdom's knightly fourth prince," she muttered. She knew Luca was looking at her, but she was too embarrassed to return his gaze. She was certain her face was bright red—she felt hot enough for it to be.

She looked up at the sky to change the topic, “The stars are pretty.”

She realized just how lucky and blessed she was to be in the situation she was in on Aridol. She realized how blessed she was to have lived the life she did with her parents on Earth until now—and craved to return; her helplessness was maddening. Everything became precious to her when she considered she might die tomorrow—she wanted to wail aloud.

Yuki was stuck dealing with an unmanageable jumble of emotions, yet the stars continued to twinkle as though they hadn’t a clue or care about her worries. She thought the stars were similar to the young man sitting beside her with a calm expression, as if he knew nothing of the mess of emotions and thoughts racing through her mind.

Somewhere in the distance, the quarrymen were still at work. The convicts worked day and night to fulfill their quotas. Her heart ached when she thought they were being forced to work through the night. She stared absently in the direction of the sound, when she caught sight of something glowing from the corner of her eye. She looked at her ring reflecting the lamplight

This ring is proof of our contract…huh? Now that I think about it, he made this contract with me to spite his rotten older brother, she recalled.

“Thanks,” she said. Even if the contract wasn’t for her sake, she appreciated it. “I was happy you contracted with me,” she smiled sweetly. She finally worked up the nerve to look at Luca’s face. But she felt as if this were their final farewell.

“…I’ll pick you up.”

“Huh?”

“If you fall somewhere again, I’ll pick you up and make another contract with you,” he murmured, turning his face away from her. He stared into the distance.

Yuki had no idea what this man was thinking since the day she met him. They may have been together for months now, but she still didn’t understand how his mind worked.

“Contracting with you may have been a spur-of-the-moment impulse on my half, but I don’t regret it,” Luca said. Yuki was captivated by how the moonlight danced across his face. Her heart squeezed as if it were in vise.

What is this? Her heart raced. She was too embarrassed to look at Luca directly. She should have been happy, but wanted to cry for some reason. *What is this? What is this? What’s with this?*

She couldn’t understand her own feelings. When Luca’s eyes met hers, she thought, *Don’t look at me.*

“D-Don’t joke around with me.” Her jumbled feelings made it

impossible to understand anything. Was she happy? Sad? Lonely? Did she regret what she was doing?

"'I don't regret it?' Don't put it that way," she complained.

I don't understand. Tears fell messily from her eyes. "Say you're glad you contracted with me!"

Luca smiled—he smiled in a way she had never seen him smile before. "Good point. I'm never bored now—I'm glad you're the one I contracted with, Yuki."

Why is he smiling? What's with that remark?

Her heart skipped another beat. Her heart kept leaping without knowing how to calm itself. "Stupid Luca."

Before she knew it, she was laughing. She felt like an invisible load had been taken off her chest. At the same time, she was happy enough she wanted to keep crying.

Chapter 23

AIN could only idly stand around and do nothing. Nasette sat on the edge of the bed where Tita slept and sipped his alcohol as he watched her sleep. When Luca declared he was bringing Tita with him to the prison, Ain vaguely thought, *I knew it.*

Luca hated the idea of putting Yuki in danger from the start. Even when they went to Fol, he would have gotten someone to take her place had she not been exposed as his Master in such detail.

Most people would normally hate the idea of having a young girl tag along with them everywhere, but Ain's master was not normal. If he were honest about it, he thought Luca changed a little from the Luca he knew in the past.

Luca interacted as the real him—not the facade he put on for others—with those who knew him since childhood, while everyone else were nothing more than tools in his eyes.

Since they were young, female spies and the like approached Luca. The way Luca dealt with those spies was a punishment vicious enough it traumatized Ain. That was the kind of man Luca was.

And yet he is carefree and open with Yuki. Aside from her strange eye color, Yuki was an ordinary child. At one time Ain suspected she was a Witch or a spy, but soon learned that was a needless fear.

Or maybe it's because she's ordinary. She appears happy. At the very least, she must have been raised by a loving and happy family. She doesn't know how to doubt others. Whenever she comes across something she doesn't know she tilts her head with curiosity, and enthusiastically tries to learn more. She got attached to me after I taught her about our world, and has since asked me questions every chance she gets.

Ain didn't think it would be possible for someone like Yuki to be raised in a land impoverished by a never-ending war. Nasette's sudden movement made Ain aware he was absently lost in his thoughts.

Nasette gently moved Tita's hair out of her face after she rolled over in bed. Tita, who had been sobbing several hours earlier, was peacefully sleeping now. Nasette had procured a sleeping poultice to ease Tita into sleep. Ain wasn't able to do anything for his childhood friend after seeing her for the first time in years. He couldn't do anything for her as she uttered, "Prince Lucat," through trembling lips.

There was nothing he could do, and it's not like he hadn't tried. The spy they hired was killed, the person they bribed ran away; they tried every conceivable plan, but each time it was obstructed by some unknown means. Their last-ditch suicidal attempt tomorrow morning may very well be a trap too. In fact, Ain expected it was; someone was working in the background to manipulate events.

"It will spell the true end for Rvydom if we don't save Sir Dante," Luca said. Luca was trying to split the continent back into three self-sufficient countries.

"We have no other option but to go through with this plan, even knowing it's a trap," Luca declared what should have been an agonizing fact for him with his usual lack of expression. With how well he knew Ain, he surely said it that way to give him peace of mind.

"We've caused you a lot of problems too…" Nasette's quiet utterance echoed through the deathly silent room. He was looking at Ain now.

"What is the matter with you all of a sudden?"

Nasette forced a sad smile, his large body shrinking dejectedly. "Nah, just that we're putting you in danger for our dad's sake too…"

"What are you saying? Geez."

Ain knew they went through a lot to keep him out of harm's way. He felt nothing but gratitude toward Luca and Nasette's protectiveness of him.

"We're doing something terrible to the little lady too," Nasette said gazing into the distance. Ain knew exactly what he was thinking about.

"But I am glad." Ain wasn't being sarcastic—he was genuinely glad. His precious childhood friend, and Nasette's beloved little sister, didn't have to go to a dangerous place she might not come back from.

"…Yeah. I can never be grateful enough to the little lady," Nasette commented, hanging his head in shame.

Ain and Nasette had committed a terrible crime. In order to protect their dear Tita, they were offering up a still innocent girl brimming with happiness to take her place. Their guilt was further evidenced by the fact neither of them objected when Yuki offered to go instead. They were overcome with fear when Luca declared he was taking Tita, yet they almost cheered internally at Yuki's offer.

Don't object. Don't say anything. Don't fight it, Ain told Tita in his heart. But Tita fought with tears streaming down her face not to let Yuki go. The other two didn't even try—they hoped Luca would agree. That was their *crime*. In return for their crime, they received an angelic smile and an indescribably heavy air.

Ain sat on the opposite side of Nasette and peered at Tita's

sleeping face. “I truly am glad.” His whisper reached only his accomplice’s ears.

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HOW *many times has he held my hand like this? His hand was the first thing I touched in this world.*

Luca’s face was always unreadable, so Yuki never knew what he was thinking, but he always offered her his hand and never hesitated to take hold of hers. She looked up at him wondering whether he knew holding her hand was enough to ease her worries—to make her think things would turn out okay. The icy hand gripping hers was sweating. But he firmly held her hand in his, not once letting go since he took hold of it.

They entered a tower called, ‘The Prison’. The top floors of the tower were used as a workshop, while the dungeon housed the main prison. Their bags were searched at the entrance of the tower. They were only allowed to carry in the jute bag containing food. All Yuki had on her was the jute bag and the Knight’s Token stashed in her breast pocket.

When Yuki asked what the Knight’s Token was supposed to be used for, Luca told her, “Someone impersonating Sir Dante might show up instead,” and forced her to hold onto Ann’s ring, as she was Dante’s master. The ring could identify the real Dante, so Yuki wore the ring on a chain wrapped around her wrist like a bracelet.

A soldier holding a torch silently descended the staircase in front of them. Yuki and Luca followed him down. Yuki tripped over her feet as she hastened to keep up with the only source of light. The hand firmly gripping hers reliably kept her from falling over her trembling feet. Their footsteps were the only noise in the dim and quiet staircase.

Yuki was very calm—terribly calm despite completely breaking down last night and not getting a wink of sleep. The tips of her fingers were freezing from lack of sleep, but the chilliness of the hand holding hers actually felt good. She had enough composure to think calmly about her situation.

Maybe I lack a sense of what real danger is? Or maybe it’s all because Luca is with me. Perhaps I don’t sense any danger because of how reliable his hand is?

She stole a peek at his handsome visage illuminated by the torchlight. He looked at her when he sensed her eyes on him. She panicked on the inside and averted her gaze. Her pulse sped up and her face warmed. Luca squeezed her hand. She squeezed back.

***

A guard stood lookout at the bottom of the stairs. Before the soldier guiding them could even finish his statement of, “This is the place,” Luca swiftly whacked him on the back of the neck, knocking him out before assaulting the lookout. He strangled the guard before he could scream. A muffled groan escaped the guard’s lips as he lost consciousness. Luca exhaled lightly before looking around the dungeon.

“Luca?”

“Hmm?”

Yuki looked up at him and then down at the unconscious soldiers wondering whether they would get back up. “If you were just going to knock the guards out, why did you need me or Tita to come with you?”

“Every other time Nasette and I scouted the prison, there were anywhere from twenty to forty guards. There has been a serious reduction in security since we arrived.”

Yuki’s heart thudded with worry, “Doesn’t that mean they know what we’re planning to do?”

“Yes.” Luca answered before he unlocked the gate and headed deeper into the prison. Yuki hesitated for barely a second before following suit and peering around the prison.

“Wow…” she said. The prison was one of the biggest spaces she had seen so far. The room was broken into several wide hallways lined with separate prison cells going as far as the eye could see. There were no windows; only the eerie glow of torchlight breaking the shadows around the iron bars. Yuki doubted they could easily find Dante in a place like this.

“Yuki, take out the Knight’s Token,” Luca promptly ordered.

“Ah, okay,” Yuki nodded, pulling the Knight’s Token from underneath her clothes. She took the ring off her bracelet and hung it from the chain. Luca sprinted in the direction the ring pointed. She chased after him, a restless feeling nudging at the back of her mind.

The prisoners called out to Luca as he ran down one of the hallways checking prison cells on the left and right side. The prisoners’ voices were a mixture of moans, jeers, and screams. Their voices echoed after them through the dungeon, further arousing Yuki’s anxiety. She ran at full speed to keep up with Luca, when he suddenly stopped in front of her.

“Sir Dante…” Luca muttered.

Yuki peered into the prison cell where a thin man in the prime of his life sat in a stupor, leaning against the stone wall behind him. His distant gaze locked onto Luca. Within seconds his eyes widened with

shock.

"Luca…" His tone of voice seemed to ask why he was here. Luca briskly set about getting him out of the cell.

"We can talk about it later. We will be discovered soon enough. Let's get out of here now," Luca said, opening the cell with a key. "Can you move?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Dante responded. He didn't look fine to Yuki, but they couldn't do anything about that right now. Aware of the situation, Dante nodded firmly.

"Yuki, are you okay—" Luca looked over his shoulder at her and froze. He was staring at her chest.

What's wrong? Yuki looked down at her chest. Something was sticking out and pushing her clothes up.

"What is this?" She quickly pulled the collar of her clothes open and peered down. A ring floated on a chain around her neck. "…Uh?"

She tried pulling it out from underneath her clothes, but it continued to float in the air, pointing to the cell opposite of Dante's. Yuki was further surprised when she saw the elderly man inside the cell—the ring on his right middle finger was glowing brightly.

"What's the meaning of this?" Yuki asked. The elderly man's cheeks were painfully sunken. Even in the dim torchlight she could tell he was emaciated yet he had a sharp look in his eyes, which frightened her.

"You…" the elderly man murmured.

"Huh? What?" Yuki tried to approach his cell, but Luca grabbed her shoulder.

"Luca…"

"You…what's going on with your ring?" Luca asked.

"Something's going on with it?" Yuki repeated, confused.

This necklace is—

"This is the only thing I brought with me from there. Use it if you're ever in any trouble. Never let it leave your side. Treat it like it's a part of your body."

How nostalgic. Yuki remembered what her father told her what seemed like years ago. The memory warmed her. No matter how old she was, her father always wanted to protect and hug her. His gentle, calm violet eyes were always with her.

"Papa's…it's my father's," Yuki said.

The elderly man grabbed the iron bars and screamed, "Lord Cahn!" His voice echoed through the vast dungeon hall. Yuki flinched. "Aaaaah! Lord Cahn! I knew you were still alive! Your servant Galian has waited many weary days. Long have I waited—it has felt like an eternity since I first waited for this day to come!"

The elderly man almost seemed like a madman as he shook the

cell bars. Scared, Yuki gripped Luca's sleeve.

"Galian?" Luca frowned. Yuki looked up at Luca wondering whether he knew the man. All she saw was Luca's purely handsome face that showed no signs of what he was thinking.

"…Luca, can you bring him with us too?" Dante asked. He appeared greatly weakened, but his voice was firm and clear. "I realize I am asking for a lot. But he is Sir Galian."

Luca humbly nodded. Yuki didn't know who the elderly man was, but she had an inkling he was connected to her father, Kaito. She stared at the emaciated old man.

Chapter 24

YUKI led Dante by the hand and Luca supported Galian on his shoulder as they made their way back to the staircase. They hurried up the pitch-dark staircase—no soldier with a torch to light the way for them this time. Yuki's thoughts were plunged in chaos as the silence enshrouding their small group made even a second feel like eternity.

Tita told me before that the rings pull toward each other. The ring Papa gave me responded to the ring the elderly man Luca is helping had. Which would mean this old man is Papa's Knight? Plus, Luca and Dante seemed to know about him. At any rate, we have to get out of here first.

Yuki didn't have the time to waste leisurely trying to figure out the answers to her questions—not when they were in a situation where they could be discovered at any moment. Sweat formed on her hand as she held Dante's. Her heart thudded in her chest. She was breathing heavily even though she was trying to be quiet.

We're almost outside. They arrived at the top of the staircase. Yuki reached for the doorknob on the partially cracked door letting a sliver of light in, when Luca stopped her.

"What's wrong?" Yuki asked, thinking, *Nasette is outside, so why is he stopping me?*

"Nasette should be waiting with the door wide-open," Luca explained.

It suddenly hit Yuki that the door should be open wide enough they could see Nasette. If he were at the entrance, he should have made himself visible to them. His absence signaled he was either captured or there was trouble.

"…Oh no."

"We were had. No wonder everything went smoothly until now," Luca stated nonchalantly.

"Wh-Wh-Wha-What should we do?" Yuki stammered.

"Calm down," Dante said, squeezing Yuki's hand.

"…We've got no choice but to fight our way out," Luca muttered.

Surprised, Yuki glanced over and saw the two older men nod in agreement. Apparently, Yuki didn't have a say in the matter.

"…For now, let's make a dash for it. Surprise will be on our side," Luca said. Yuki looked at Luca with eyes long-accustomed to the

darkness. Their eyes met. She nodded visibly and distanced herself from the door. Suddenly, someone grabbed her hand. She looked up at Luca's handsome features as he eyed the door. "Let's go."

Everyone sprinted for the door. The men bashed into it, forcing it open with their weight.

It's bright! The morning sunlight spilled onto their faces, momentarily blurring Yuki's vision.

"They came out!" a man shouted.

"To arms!"

As Luca predicted, men surrounded the outside of the door. Their lethal weapons glinted in the bright sunlight. Yuki and the others continued to sprint without stopping. Yuki ran with wider steps than ever before. She focused on her feet to make sure she wouldn't trip and slow the others down. Luca yanked on her hand. The motion caused Yuki to pull the other hand she was holding.

Luca held Galian and Yuki's hand, and Yuki held onto Luca and Dante. Dante and Galian inevitably ran slowly. Years of rotting away in prison had long since atrophied their muscles.

Our enemy has the path blocked off with weapons! Trying to break through them headfirst is nothing but suicidal! The moment the thought crossed Yuki's mind, Nasette appeared out of the thicket.

"Luca! Dad! Take this!" Nasette shouted, tossing them swords. Luca ran even faster and let go of Yuki's hand. Dante let go of her hand too. Nasette dashed toward them with his long sword after he tossed their weapons.

"Keep running straight ahead, Little Lady! Tita is waiting!" Nasette shouted as he passed her, heading straight for the wall of armed men. Yuki nodded.

Nasette roared as he swept his long sword sideways in a wide arc and easily blew back several men raising their swords to swing at Yuki. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the long sword slice through a body, spraying blood across the ground.

"Thank you!" Yuki shouted, running in the direction he told her to go. Hoarse screams rang from every direction around her. Yuki ran with all her might, intentionally blocking the screams from her ears.

After running some distance, she heard someone call her name. She looked in the direction of the voice and saw Ain and Tita hiding, their faces covered by a mantle.

"You're safe!" Tita exclaimed, checking her from head to toe, before embracing her.

"I-I'm glad to see you're both safe too," Yuki panted through Tita's bear hug. She was tired, but months of travel in this world had changed her from the girl she was when she first appeared in Aridol.

"Yes, we were left back where it is safe," Ain said. Yuki heard a

horse whiny nearby.

"You have the horses tied up nearby?"

"Yes, so we can depart as soon as the others return…"

"Then you should have all our stuff too, right?" Yuki asked, undoing her bags and digging through them until she pulled out her archery case.

"Yuki! Where are you going?" Ain exclaimed.

"I'm gonna go support them!"

"That's reckless!"

Yuki ran off again, ignoring Tita and Ain's pleas to come back.

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A man roared as he raised his sword to slash Luca across his unguarded left. Luca kneed the man in the gut and removed the man's legs in a single sweeping motion. Luca felt sweat drip from his forehead as he flipped his sword and thrust under his arm, impaling another man trying to stab him from behind.

The man fell, his eyes rolling into the back of his head. Luca knew he was breathing heavily, but the armed men attacking him were relentless enough there wasn't a second to stop and catch his breath.

Why are there so many of them? I predicted they would see through our prison break, but the sheer number of armed men and their quality doesn't add up. They're too strong. They're too skilled for random criminals deciding to attack us on a whim. Plus, they're too well coordinated. They fight like a unit. Are they a military platoon? I'd guess there's about fifty total.

"Uraaaaaa!" a man screamed, swinging his sword at Luca.

Luca dodged the man's blade, swiveling around with his own sword cutting off the man's arm at the shoulder in a splatter of blood. The man fell to the ground, rolling around screaming.

"I won't die," Luca spat, cutting down armed man after armed man as they came at him. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a man collapse in the distance after letting out a guttural scream—an arrow jutting out of his shoulder.

"…Don't tell me she—" Luca muttered, overcome with surprise.

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"ALL right! It hit!" Yuki cheered, grabbing another arrow from her quiver. The arrows she asked Ain to buy for her were well made, and flew perfectly through the air thanks to her constant practice with them during their travels. "Next! Next!"

She pulled back another arrow and locked onto her next target from where she hid in a tall thicket. She aimed for the man's shoulder.

I don't want to kill, but if I can at least cut down on their forces…

Yuki was painfully aware of how useless she would be if she went out on the front lines. But with her skills in archery, she could provide support from behind. She braced her bow and pulled back on the arrow. She closed her eyes and felt the bow bend.

Okay, I can do this.

She opened her eyes, and released the arrow at her target. The arrow stabbed into the man's shoulder knocking him onto the ground. She retrieved another arrow and identified her next target.

"Next," she said to herself. She pulled back, closed her eyes and took a deep breath. The next time she opened her eyes someone's feet were right in front of her face.

"Eh?" startled, she quietly gasped.

She heard a gruff voice directly above her, "Where's the coward! Here?"

The man stabbed his sword into the thicket directly beside Yuki.

He's going to kill me. She was paralyzed at the attack, fear overwhelming her. *Aaah, they found me. I wonder whether my idea to shoot people in the first place was dumb*.

Yuki forced a calm trying to think clearly. She closed her eyes and kept quiet, when she suddenly heard the man shriek and collapse.

"…How?" Yuki muttered staring dumbfounded at the blood pooling near her feet.

"You can easily tell where the arrows are coming from if they keep getting fired from the same location," Luca said above her head. She poked her head out of the brush, and spotted Luca's bloodied retreating figure.

"Luca…"

"I'm counting on you to cover our backs," Luca said before sprinting off. He cut down several more men and began fighting in an area closer to Yuki.

"Thank you," her whisper faded into the wind without ever reaching his ears.

Yuki gripped her arrow and identified her next target.

Chapter 25

SILENCE enshrouded the prison entrance that only moments prior was the scene of a dreadful battle among four Knights and a troop of more than fifty soldiers. The only ones left standing were Yuki and her companions—their enemies either lay dead or incapacitated from their injuries.

The group moved on without rest in an attempt to avoid the enemy's reinforcements. Nasette ran while carrying an exhausted Galian until they made it to where Ain and Tita waited with the horses. Quickly mounting their horses, the group broke into an all-out gallop away from Cele.

Several backbreaking hours later finally allowed the group and their horses to rest in the middle of a grove with a creak winding through it.

Ain was the first to note how amazing it was for a group of contracted Knights—not soldiers—to gather and fight in one place.

"Bonded Knights generally serve their master, so it is very rare for them to do anything in a group. Four Knights fighting on our side is the only reason we were able to win without causalities to our side," Ain said ardently before he left to join the rest of the men to discuss the current situation.

Left behind, Yuki and Tita set about cleaning Nasette's bloodied armor and preparing a cold meal. They couldn't risk a fire until they were safely back on Adolunde's side of the border.

"You know, I was startled you suddenly took off in such a dangerous situation, Yuki," Tita said, surprise still marring her voice.

Yuki laughed awkwardly. "I couldn't just sit still and do nothing when there was a chance I could offer some backup." She shyly scratched her head.

"Oh no, don't mimic my brother!" Tita laughed when she saw Yuki's gesture.

Blood had hardened on the armor and just wouldn't come off. Yuki scrubbed at it with a wet cloth.

I'm kinda happy for some reason.

Yuki was rarely treated like an adult due to her childlike appearance. She wasn't being treated like a full-fledged adult right now either, but she was heartened by a growing confidence they considered her useful

in battle. She focused her strength into the hand scrubbing the armor. *I'm glad I learned archery.*

Yuki practiced archery ever since she was little. During the sad times, the happy times, times when she worried, she was always, always with her bow. Ever since she stopped aging, she had to stop practicing archery in public, so she was overjoyed to be able to actively use a bow and arrow again.

This put her in a revitalized mood in comparison to the anxiety and terror she faced going into the prison dungeons. The sun had risen to the highest point in the sky and was gently spilling through the tree canopy. The rustling of leaves on the branches rang soothingly in her ears.

"Hey, do you hear something?" Tita suddenly asked dubiously.

"Hear what?" Yuki closed her eyes and listened carefully.

Someone is crying.

Yuki heard the voice of a small child crying. She jumped to her feet and ran in the direction she heard the child.

"Yuki!"

Yuki continued to run, paying no heed to Tita trying to stop her. Before long, she spotted a boy sitting on the ground bawling.

"Mommmmy!"

Yuki walked closer and saw his knee was covered in dirt mixed with a little blood, like he had tripped and scraped it.

"Hi, are you okay?" Yuki said with a smile to the sobbing boy. "Are you all right?"

The boy turned toward Yuki. The moment he saw Yuki's eyes he instantly stopped crying and looked as if he saw something terrifying.

"Aah, my eyes are a bit of a weird color, but I'm no one scary," Yuki tried to explain.

That's a painful reaction to see…but I shouldn't expect otherwise. People with violet eyes are rare in this world too.

She smiled sweetly at the boy and patted him on the head. "Boys shouldn't cry too much." She helped him up and offered him her hand. "My friends and I are resting over there. We'll take care of your cuts, so come with me."

The boy nodded and took her hand.

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YUKI walked back to where they had set up a temporary camp. Tita stood up the moment she noticed her approach. Luca and the others were right next to her. Yuki walked over to them in high spirits, wondering whether they were already finished with their discussion.

"Yuki!" Tita looked anxious.

“This boy fell over there and hurt himself. I’m going to wash and treat his wounds for him,” Yuki said with an innocent grin, when Luca walked right up to her.

She thought he had business with the boy, when he swung his hand and slapped her across the cheek. He didn’t hit her with his full strength, but he didn’t hold back completely either. A dry smack rang in Yuki’s ears.

“Luca!” Tita screamed.

Yuki’s ears were ringing. Heat rose to the area where her cheek was slapped and it throbbed with a sharp pain. Yuki brought her left hand to her reddened cheek and stood in a daze, utterly unaware of why she was slapped.

What was that? What exactly did I do? Did I do something worthy of being slapped? Yuki wondered, anger rapidly boiling inside her.

“What are you doing!” she shouted.

“That’s enough!”

Yuki glared at him. Luca was expressionless, but his expressionlessness was scary in and of itself. Yuki flinched.

“What has been with you lately? Just when I think you’ve requested to do something selfish for no sane reason I can comprehend, you suddenly wander onto the battlefield and put yourself in danger. To top it all off you pick up some brat when you yourself are nothing more than a child. Why are you getting in our way when you can’t even take care of yourself?”

Getting in our way. Those words pierced through Yuki’s heart like a spear. Was he saying everything she thought she did with good intentions to help actually just caused more problems?

I’m such an idiot. I’m embarrassed I happily thought they treated me like an adult and that I did something useful.

Shame and the desire to disappear overwhelmed her when she thought about how everyone witnessed her shameful display.

Heat rose to Yuki’s eyes. She told herself she shouldn’t cry, but once the switch flipped on, the tears wouldn’t stop. Wanting to escape from that place, she turned on her heel and ran. She heard Tita and Ain call after her, but she couldn’t look back.

She turned just before nearly ramming into a tree and continued to run on the impulse of her emotions. She wanted the embarrassment weighing on her chest to disappear. She wanted to erase the sadness lingering in her mind. Yuki continued to run and run, even once she ran out of breath and her sides ached.

Once her thighs hurt so bad she couldn’t run anymore, she found herself walking. Even then, she kept walking for some distance before eventually sliding onto her butt on the ground. The cold ground felt nice and cool against her overheated body.

"…Haah…" Tears poured down her cheeks streak after streak.

"What's with you, stupid tears?" she cursed after wiping the tears over and over again, but they still spilled down her cheeks with a vengeance.

I knew it. Not a single thing has changed about me. I thought things had changed a little since I came to this world. I thought I could live carefree here without ever feeling inferior again. All of that is surely thanks to Luca—I knew that from the start.

"That's why I wanted to be of use to him…!" she weakly explained to the empty space around her.

He said I was getting in their way. Which basically means I'm useless to him, right? That's no different from how I was in the past. I wonder if it's impossible for me to be with him any longer.

She ran away from them. She ran so far she had no idea where she even was anymore. *Surely no one will search for someone as useless as me*, she thought self-derisively and started sobbing.

I wish the key for returning to my own world was experiencing this intense sadness, Yuki thought, begrudging the gods for her situation.

Chapter 26

LUCA heaved a long-winded sigh. Tita was angry at him again, at least if her bright-red face was anything to go by. She looked as if she were about to explode at any moment—the boy was clearly baffled as she squeezed the color out of his hand.

"Luca! Go after her!"

As expected, the first words out of Tita's mouth related to chasing after Yuki. Luca sighed again. "There is something I want you to all hear before I do—"

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LUCA sat alone on a log in an absentminded daze. Nasette and the others were shocked when they heard what Luca had to say and frantically went to search for Yuki afterward.

Luca sighed. He was certain he hurt her dearly. A part of him regretted rebuking his own Master. The image of her face as she desperately tried to endure the tears filling her eyes replayed in the back of his mind. The cheek he slapped turned red.

But as much as she is my Master, there is no way for me to protect her if she has no sense of the danger she is in. Luca had no idea why she even ventured onto the battlefield in the first place. *I can't deny it was reassuring she had our backs. She's a good shot too.*

But Yuki was neither a soldier nor Luca's retainer. If anything, she was the Master he was supposed to protect. They were in such a dangerous position during their escape from the prison earlier, he accidentally asked her to cover their backs.

Asking her to help us was a failure on my part.

Luca disliked the fact he was protected by his Master, who also happened to be a young maiden.

That person absolutely would have never done what Yuki did…

The image of that person's slender and fragile form crossed his mind. He could hear her gentle voice call his name. The soft and slight scent of flowers that surrounded her and her abnormally white skin were still—

"Luca!"

Luca came to his senses when he suddenly heard his name. Tita stood imposingly in front of him.

"…You're still here?" When he didn't answer, Tita muttered, "Good grief. It's understandable that you would be angry, Luca, but do you understand why Yuki went to the battlefield?"

Luca looked at her with a face that plainly said there's no way he'd understand why. Tita smiled softly.

"Yuki prioritizes others before herself. You understand that much, right? She put herself in danger when I said I would go to the prison. She put herself on the line when it seemed like Ain was going to get left behind before coming to Cele.

"Do you think someone who goes so far for others would be able to run away alone while everyone else is fighting for their lives? I can't believe you would fail to understand your Master to such a degree. Just what part of Yuki have you been looking at until now?" Tita chided, a little exasperated with him.

"Well, it can't be helped either way. Yuki will prioritize others no matter the situation. That's one of the things that's so great about her," Tita said.

I know that. I knew that before you said anything about it, Tita, Luca grumbled in his thoughts. Yuki always took action for the sake of others and sympathized with them. She resented Orga more than Luca did when he ordered him to the front lines in Fol and when he ordered Luca back to fight another battle elsewhere.

He'd nearly forgotten everything about his one late-night encounter with her, but he clearly remembered her eyes as they gazed up at him with great concern. And before he realized it, he was going out of his way to do things for her.

Especially earlier—he should have just let Yuki go on with the prison guards to find Dante, but instead he knocked them out. What would he have done if there were twenty guards as he originally expected? He got the feeling he would have done the same thing.

Luca chuckled to himself. *That unmanageable tomboy… Is she sitting alone somewhere chiding herself right now? Or is she meekly crying?*

"Luca! Apologize to her!" Tita's face was flushed crimson with anger when he looked up at her.

"Yeah, I know. I will."

At any rate, the fact that tiny girl is my master won't change. Whether I rebuke her or make her cry, it's my duty to be by her side.

Luca removed his ring and pulled the Knight's Token and chain from his chest pocket.

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CRYING as much as she wanted to cry caused some of Yuki's frustration to spill away with her tears, leaving her calmer and worn out.

My eyes hurt. Her eyelids were hot and heavy after sobbing; a dull pain throbbed in her head too. She was depressed, but more clearheaded now.

"I have to apologize…"

I have to tell Luca I'm sorry and thank him. But I ran away. What kind of expression should I face him with now? What if he refuses to allow me to be with him even after I apologize? Thinking about it makes me even more afraid. And if he does refuse me? What do I do then? Will I be sold off this time and live out the rest of my life clad in tattered clothes forced to beg for scraps?

"I don't want that! I'll bow with my face to the dirt until he brings me with him."

She even considered begging him to allow her to work at Adolunde's castle as a servant. Anything was better than being sold off.

"…I have to go."

Tita is surely searching for me. Yuki stood up and dusted the dirt from her clothes. The cool, hard ground and icy air thoroughly chilled her.

"Hey! Anyone there?" she shouted in hopes someone nearby would hear. But there was no response. "I ran quite a way after all…"

What's the deal with this? She blinked several times. She was a little tired after sobbing away her pent-up stress. Every few steps she took she called out in hopes her friends were near enough to hear her. The setting sun dyed the world crimson.

I don't get why you can't search for your Knight with the ring if you don't have the Knight's Token. What's the point in that? Yuki glared at her ring, but she had no way to use it to search for Luca. She swung her hand around, unsure of how to relieve her resentment over the actions that dragged her into this ridiculous situation.

"I mean Luca should be the one who comes looking for me! N-No matter how wrong I was, he's way too short-tempered to raise his hand against me…"

The rest of her sentence trailed off as she muttered her complaints. However, she was painfully aware how right Luca was.

I'm just a ten-year-old brat in his eyes after all.

"But if he wants to see me as a bratty child then that's fine, just be a good guardian and come find meeee!"

Yuki searched the area, but all that surrounded her were trees. An already terrible situation was further worsened by the fact it was getting dark and the forest was taking on a creepy gloom. She was

getting worried she didn't know which way was which. In the distance strange animals shrieked. Fear crawled up her spine as the once-bright forest took on an eeriness she had never seen in Tokyo's well-lit streets.

They say not to move around when you're lost. But what should you do when you're the one who went and got yourself lost? As Yuki pondered what to do next, the thicket to the left of her moved.

"Who's there!" she jumped back in surprise. Was it someone she knew? Or was it a bandit?

The thicket rustled and moved until a boy stuck his face out.

"Ah! You're the boy from earlier!" Yuki sighed with relief. The boy slipped out of the thicket and walked over to Yuki.

"Miss…" he muttered weakly.

Yuki glanced at his knee. Someone must have treated his scraped knee because a bandage was neatly wrapped around it.

"What's the matter? …Did you come looking for me?"

The boy nodded firmly. "You're the one who saved me after all, Miss."

The innocent way he thanked her made Yuki happy.

"Thank you."

"…Everyone is this way." The boy timidly held out his hand. Yuki smiled sweetly and took his hand.

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THE boy led her by the hand as he weaved his way through the trees until they came out in a clearing the size of a small apartment. The boy stopped once they set foot into the clearing.

"What's the matter? Is something here?" Yuki crouched down until she was eye level with the boy. When their eyes met his face filled with sadness and he cast down his eyes.

"Miss…I'm sorry?" he said, almost as if he were asking a question.

I'm sorry? Why is he apologizing? Yuki didn't understand what he meant. The boy let go of her hand and gripped the hem of his shirt with both hands.

"What's…the matter?"

"My mom…my mom is…" the boy started sobbing. "I wanted to save my mom…so…I went looking for you…Miss…"

"…You want to save your mom?" Yuki tilted her head to the side in confusion, when she heard footsteps and saw a face she really did not want to see.

"Basically, mommy got captured, and in order to save mommy I have to find and bring a little miss with violet eyes to the instructed

location. If I don't, both mommy and me will be killed," Orga said derisively mimicking the boy's voice while laughing as if he were enjoying himself to the utmost degree. He held a rope leading to a tied up woman.

"MOMMY!"

"RUN!" the woman shrieked, but was smacked roughly over the head by Prince Orga. The boy made to help, only for spears to be leveled toward him by the guards standing at the forest's edge.

What the heck?

"Why are you doing this?" Yuki said in a dark voice coming from the deep hatred seething inside her. She wanted to lash out after hearing his sick little story.

"Why, you ask? What a funny question. Isn't the answer obvious? They aren't needed. This or this thing's mother either. They aren't needed at all; that's why," Orga drew his sword before he finished speaking and swung it. Orga's sword pierced through the mother's back and stuck out her chest.

"NO! MOMMY!" The boy rushed forward to catch the woman who moved forward awkwardly like a broken doll and collapsed. Orga swiftly pulled his sword out of her, splashing blood everywhere, and met the boy before he could reach his mother. He raised his sword and swung it down. The boy with a bandaged knee took his last breath after being dealt a wound no small white bandage would be able to cover.

"Aaah…" a guttural scream narrowly escaped Yuki's throat. "H-How could you!"

It all happened in seconds. Another scream that wasn't a voice anymore struggled to escape Yuki's mouth as the boy's blood splattered before her eyes. Her throat hurt, but she couldn't stop screaming.

"See? They're so unnecessary they became worthless just like that. The disgusting living things are all gone now," Orga said in a terribly elated voice.

"…Why are you here? Why are you doing something like this! Why? You're in the middle of a war right now, so why? Why aren't you in your castle!" Yuki shouted through her confusion. The expression on the boy's face when he said he wanted to save his mother moments ago was burned into her mind and wouldn't go away.

"Ah, yes, the war. The word war has such a nice ring to it, doesn't it? But you see, the way things actually stand right now, we're only having Rvydom's prisoners of war kill each other, so there's not even the slightest bit of damage to either my country or Maruk, you know?"

Yuki glared at Orga with all the hatred roiling inside her as he spouted his unbelievable nonsense. Orga smiled with the same spiteful eyes as Yuki.

"What a nice look you've got there. It gives me the chills. Just makes me want to kill you."

"How are you a prince? You are nothing but scum!"

He's way beyond rotten and evil. This man is insane.

Yuki felt like his insanity was going to rub off on her and make her go insane with him.

"Why, thank you. Those are the greatest words of praise I could ever receive. But you know what? I won't kill you off as easily as that. I'll kill you with what will be the perfect ending."

"Don't screw with me!" Just as Yuki shouted, something impacted the back of her neck. A feeling akin to anemia—where all the blood rushes from the body—rushed through her before she collapsed.

"The Prince of Maruk and I will screw with you all we want," Orga laughed malevolently; his voice not reaching the unconscious Yuki. A young man with the appearance of a doll and eyes like glass stood behind her.

Chapter 27

TITA and the others were unable to find Yuki even after the sun set. Tita was exhausted from searching. She dragged her blistered feet until she arrived back at their inn.

Luca spent the whole day holding his ring out on the chain. Eventually, his ring directed them to a clearing in the grove where Yuki's ring lay without its master. Beside her contract ring with Luca was the ring paired with Galian's. And a little farther ahead of the rings were—

"…Terrible." Tita was overwhelmed by sorrow when she remembered the gruesome sight. The boy who had scraped his knee—the boy whose name she forgot to ask—it was his corpse in the clearing. Collapsed directly beside him was the cruelly murdered corpse of the mother he had been searching for.

"She was likely kidnapped," Luca said. His face held a twisted anguish. Ain and Luca stayed behind in the grove to search some more.

I've never seen Luca with that expression before. The fact he got angry, Yuki running away from him, and her kidnapping—he is very likely blaming himself for all of it.

"Yuki…" Tita muttered.

Tita was lost now. Only Yuki appeared to sparkle with life in this grim world of depravity and war. She was always cheerful and invigorated those around her with her smile. With Yuki gone, their group had lost sight of its guiding star.

In this situation, this situation without Yuki, am I going to have to go back to that place? Back to the castle without any allies? Tita dreaded the thought.

She zoned out as she dried her hair after getting out of the bath. Everyone had been silent on the way back to the inn—it was suffocating.

Someone knocked on the door. "Can I come in for a moment?" Ain asked from the other side. Ain was supposed to have stayed behind with Luca to look around the forest some more.

"Yes, come in."

Did they find Yuki? Tita tried to gain control of her expectations, only to be let down when a dejected Ain opened the door.

"…She wasn't there, was she?"

"Yeah. The grove is complicated with many intertwining animal trails, but it's small. Yet we still couldn't find her anywhere."

Tita smiled a little at the nasally sound to his voice. Ain was saddened by Yuki's loss, just like Tita.

"Prince Luca was acting strange as well. I told him not to let it get to him, but from the look of things, he is most definitely blaming himself…" Ain said, sadness etched on his face.

Tita smiled at him and invited him into her room. "Sit. I'll prepare some tea for you," she said, forcing Ain into a chair. Ain sniffled. Tita pretended not to hear as she prepared the tea.

"…You're still always the crybaby," she muttered.

Ain was always this way. Whenever he was teased by Nasette or treated coldly by Luca, he would come crying to her. And every time Tita would do her best to comfort him. Tita was saved by the fact there was one constant in her life among the constantly changing chaos of the world.

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THE crackling of something burning filled the room. A bright-red flame swayed and popped. Yuki was slowly regaining consciousness. Her eyes flicked open with shock; her consciousness raced to make sense of the situation.

That's right, I…was found by Prince O—no, that madman is no prince—Orga. He killed the boy and then something knocked me out from behind. I remember that much.

Yuki tried to move, but her body was stuck in place. She turned her neck to see her hands tied behind her back and her feet shackled together with an iron ball attached to the chain roughly half a foot away from her.

The sharp pain of a headache rushed to her head. She grimaced at the shackles restraining her and glanced at the swaying fire. Some sort of metal tool sat in the center of the fire. The tip of the tool burned red-hot in the menacing flames.

"Hi there, you up now?"

Yuki looked up when she heard a voice she really didn't want to hear—on the other side of the swaying flames stood a smirking Orga.

"…Worst possible way to wake up," Yuki said.

Orga's coldhearted eyes simmered with stifled laughter. "I'm surprised you have it in you to be sarcastic in this situation."

There's no way I'm not scared, but I don't want this psycho to know it.

Yuki's teeth chattered against each other since she woke up.

Orga's black eyes stared at her—their depths seething with the same hatred since they first met. His shoes clattered against the cold stone floor as he approached her. Yuki edged back the best she could being shackled. Her heart raced.

"Haha, looks like you know how to show a cute frightened reaction after all."

Yuki looked past Orga and saw someone standing behind him. The young man standing there had his long light-blue hair tied back and stared absently at Yuki with light-blue glass marble-like eyes.

"Let me introduce you, he's one of Maruk's princes. He came here because he said he wanted to take a look at the Legendary Witch."

"The Legendary Witch? I'm not the Legendary Witch, you fool. You've got the wrong person," Yuki spat. Orga burst out laughing at her. His loud, maniacal laughter reverberated off the stone walls.

"You're an idiot, aren't you? You don't have to be the real Legendary Witch. You will be whatever I deem you to be. As long as we tell the people that Rvydom's princess was actually a Witch."

"…What's with that sick logic?"

"Ahaha," Orga laughed with glee like a young boy. Then with a smile like a devil he said, "All right, I'll let you in on it. We're currently having Rvydom's prisoners of war fight each other. But you know what? The people of Rvydom are really foolish. They believe their king is still alive.

"That he will someday restore Rvydom to its former glory. Someday a king with violet eyes will appear again. And they die believing that. It's not even laughable anymore," Orga said scornfully.

"So we got the idea to capture someone with violet eyes and execute them. I didn't think there was anyone else aside from the Legendary Witch with violet eyes. Plans were in place to capture her, but it's not like she earned the title of Legendary Witch for nothing.

"But then you appeared with impeccable timing. That's why we're going to use this lovely coincidence to make you appear as a Witch and further drop the people of Rvydom into the utmost level of despair. Aren't we nice?" Orga sneered.

"…You're utterly mad! You're totally insane! What's fun about doing all that? What do you gain from it?" Yuki shouted.

Orga looked down at her and smiled cruelly. "What, you ask? Killing common trash is fun, but what I want to do is different. This world has no need for anything aside from humans. No need for Witches, Rvydom, or anything else."

Orga elegantly rose to his feet and stood in front of Yuki. He drew his sword and sliced open the clothing covering her chest.

"…!"

Frightened, she winced in preparation for the slash, but there

was no pain. A cold breeze merely caressed the exposed skin on her chest. Orga walked over to the iron pot holding the swaying fire. He picked up the bright-red branding iron that had been sitting in the fire.

"What? …No way." Yuki's teeth clattered so much she couldn't get them to line up. She looked to the man with light-blue hair for help, but his glass-like eyes only stared at her in an empty daze.

"Do you know how you tell if someone is a Witch?"

"Stop it…"

Yuki tried to back away, but she couldn't move. She frantically shook her head, but the red-hot iron relentlessly neared her chest.

"They have a seal in the shape of a flower somewhere on their body," Orga said with a twisted smile.

"D-Don't!"

The red-hot brand was pressed against Yuki's chest. She screamed. The sound of flesh sizzling away and her shrieks of pain echoed off the stone walls. The moment the thought of how much it hurt reached her mind she felt only numbing pain. Her scream was more of a guttural roar than anything made by a human voice.

Someone. Someone. SOMEONE…save me.

Yuki's throat ached, her whole body convulsed, but she had no idea how to stop screaming as the numbing was steadily overcome by a sheer burning pain expanding from where the iron touched her flesh.

How could she escape this searing pain? How could she escape the stench of her own flesh cooking? Her mind was a mess of racing thoughts—until finally her consciousness couldn't hang on any longer.

Chapter 28

LUCA returned to the inn to report to the others and was about to leave to search some more when Nasette stopped him.

"Luca."

"I'll be back soon."

"Yuki was undoubtedly dragged off to Maruk. You know that already," Nasette said.

Luca knew what Nasette said was true. He knew Yuki was no longer nearby and that wasn't because she strayed off on her own. Her ring and necklace's removal were done intentionally, not by accident.

"Then I'll go back to Maruk. You take everyone back to the castle."

"Luca! Remember your own status!" Nasette grabbed Luca's arm. Luca roughly knocked his arm off. "You can't stay away from the castle any longer than you already have. You're fully aware of your limits, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I know. I understand far more than I want to. I'm not a free man after all," Luca said self-derisively.

Nasette sighed when he saw his expression.

Why has he lost his composure this badly? Nasette wondered.

"At any rate, let's head back to the castle first. If they wanted to kill Yuki they would have back at the grove. She's a tough girl," he tried to convince Luca.

Luca stayed silent. He was fully aware he had no choice but to follow Nasette's advice.

"Are you telling me to lose yet another one…?" his quiet voice fell in the silent inn entryway like a raindrop in a forest.

Nasette suddenly froze, a cold shiver running through him. "Luca…don't tell me you've—"

"Prince Luca! Prince Luca! We have trouble!" Ain's voice cut Nasette off.

"What's wrong?" Luca glanced back at Ain, his usual calm replacing whatever emotion started to show.

Ain eyed Luca's face suspiciously for a moment. "Did something happen, Prince Luca?"

"…No. Now, what's your business?"

The corners of Ain's eyes were a little red as he looked at Luca

and searched for the right words. He was likely trying to come up with the right choice of words, but failed to do so.

"Prince Luca, um, well…" After a moment of fumbling over his words, Ain resolved himself to break the news. "Prince Luca, you have been called under question for treason."

"Huh?" Luca raised an eyebrow.

Nasette couldn't help commenting. "Oi, oi, Ain. Now is not the time for bad jokes—"

"I am not joking. An urgent Mage Message came. It is very likely a physical letter will arrive shortly."

Mage—that one word was enough to inform Luca and Nasette they had to believe Ain. Only Ain could receive Mage Messages.

"I received a Mage Message saying I must have Prince Luca return to Adolunde Castle immediately. I believe this must be some sort of misunderstanding, but they have left you with no other choice but to go and prove your innocence firsthand. Let's return with haste. I have already asked Tita to pack our things. I have also requested Sir Dante and Sir Galian prepare for immediate departure."

"But why has Luca been called under question out of the blue like this?" Nasette asked.

Ain's eyes opened wide and he bit his tongue. It took a moment before he painfully explained. "…The royal capital took it seriously when Yuki impersonated the Legendary Witch. Apparently they believe Prince Luca is conspiring with a Witch to overthrow Prince Orga, who does not think fondly of Witches."

"What the heck kinda reasoning is that? There's a limit to how idiotic they can be," Nasette groaned.

"But that is exactly why they want to ascertain the truth, which only further fosters their doubt," Luca added calmly.

"Luca," Nasette started. Luca was expressionless, but having spent so many years with him, Nasette knew what it meant—Luca was seething inside.

"…My great brother did me in."

"Prince Luca," Ain said, anxiously looking at him.

"Ain, we're returning to the castle. We'll swiftly wrap up all the annoying political stuff and rush to Yuki's rescue. Nasette, Ain and I will go on ahead. Take care of the others," Luca commanded with calm indifference.

"You got it," Nasette answered. Luca turned on his heel and walked past Nasette.

***

YUKI was enshrouded in darkness. She could barely make out the glass-like light-blue eyes and jet-black eyes staring at her. Yuki screamed—screamed with every bit of strength in her as pain suffused her body.

"What is it you hate so much?"

No answer.

"Why are you so sad?"

No answer.

"Why do you look at me like this?"

No matter how much she questioned the darkness, no one answered her.

"Hey, why?"

Why do you look at me with those eyes? With those distant disinterested eyes? With those hate-filled eyes? With those coldhearted eyes? With those apathetic eyes?

"Stop it…"

"I'm begging you." Her plea was buried in darkness and didn't reverberate anywhere.

"Don't look at me with those eyes!"

Don't look like this is something unrelated and unimportant to you.

"Please…look at me."

Yuki realized the inconsistency in what she was saying. But she didn't want to be seen. But if they didn't look at her, she felt as if she would lose sense of her own existence.

"Hey?" The moment the word slipped from her lips, fire burned at the area near her heart. The flames spread in the blink of an eye and burned Yuki's chest as her torturers applied the brand to her flesh again.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!"

She fell limp against her shackles writhing from the pain, but the eyes watching her never changed. The throbbing searing pain that turned numb in her chest pierced all the way to her heart. The fire slowly sizzled her skin, engraving some sort of flower bud into her flesh with each petal they burned in separately. Burning away one spot wasn't enough for them. They needed to press each petal-shaped brand into her flesh until the flower bloomed.

Yuki welcomed the peace of oblivion; unconsciousness had never been so sweet.

***

YUKI woke in shock. Her heart beat at an unnatural rate.

…A dream?

She was sweating from every part of her body. Her clothes clung

with a vengeance to her clammy flesh. She tried to sit up, but a pain like an electrical current surged in her chest, sending a series of sharp spasms through her body forcing her to stay lying down. A blistered flower bud was burned into her chest: it was red and swollen from the repeated use of the brand.

I wonder what kind of flower it's supposed to be. Does every Witch have a seal in the shape of a flower like this one?

Yuki slowly attempted to sit up a second time and let out a long, painful breath. Her throat prickled with pain and dryness. She tried to speak, but only a hoarse, rough breath made it through her sore and parched throat. The coppery tang of blood told her she had bitten the tip of her tongue when she screamed her lungs out; letting her know just how painful it was to have a part of your body burned and branded.

Yuki felt feverish. It was clear as day the feverish heat came from the burns on her chest.

I miss the cold; I want the chill of ice to bring my wounds comfort. The flesh around the burns was oozing. *Where am I?*

Yuki took in her surroundings—she was in a very stark yet normal room. She was lying on a bed and a small table sat beside it. The room was nothing like the prison cells she saw in Cele's dungeons.

How long was I tortured for? How many times did I lose consciousness when they started burning me with the branding iron? This should be the place Orga brought me afterward. So then why is this a proper room and not a prison? What exactly is going to happen to me?

The intense pain weighed heavily on her mind, leaving her in a sort of blank daze.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Yuki nervously looked at the door. A nasty sweat covered her hands when she thought about what kind of terrible things they planned for her this time.

I can't take anymore. I don't want to feel any more pain. I don't want to see Orga or anyone else. I want to go home. Tears moistened the edge of her eyes, but no matter what she would not show weakness to her tormentors.

The door must have been locked from the outside, because she heard a key turn in the lock and the handle turn before someone cautiously opened the door. In stepped—

Maruk's prince.

The young man with long light-blue hair appeared with a bucket and a water pitcher. He walked in a daze until he noticed Yuki was awake. He stopped for a moment. But his light-blue eyes, which reflected no discernible emotion, neither clouded nor lightened at the sight of her. He merely walked over to the bed she was sitting on without hesitation.

Yuki inched away from him on the bed; the fabric sent shooting pains through the flesh rubbed raw by the shackles. Still she moved away until her back impacted the wall. With nowhere to go, she clung to the wall. Maruk's prince paid her no heed. He placed the bucket on the table next to her bed and silently pulled a cup and cloth out of it. He poured water into the cup and dumped some into the bucket.

What does he intend to do? Yuki stared at the prince. He suddenly held the cup out to her.

"Eh…" Yuki's hoarse voice didn't sound like a voice, more like the growl of a beast. She stared at Maruk's prince in bewilderment.

"Water," he muttered.

So he can speak.

She was a little surprised he could speak, though she wasn't sure whether she preferred him as a mute or not. Not once had he opened his mouth until now. His eyes were still gazing into some distant place. He stood there with the cup held out to her, not particularly minding or reveling in her fear of him. The sudden presence of water before her eyes further increased her desire to quench her parched throat.

But is it really just water?

How could she believe him? This man watched on in the same absentminded daze the whole time the branding iron was pressed against her skin. He stood there watching as she came in and out of consciousness and the branding iron was reheated and applied repeatedly.

I wonder whether he'd even hesitate to kill.

But her throat was dreadfully dry. She gulped back what little saliva came up in anticipation of soothing water.

"……"

The prince must have noticed Yuki was only staring at the cup and what she was thinking, because he brought the cup to his lips and took a sip before offering it to her again.

"It's just water," he informed her matter-of-factly, in an almost toneless voice.

He was neither saddened nor angered by her suspicion—he was just indifferent and matter-of-fact about all of it. Yuki hesitantly reached for the cup. She gulped all the contents in one large sip. Chilled water surged down her burning throat.

She coughed, but forced the water down, each sip bringing long-needed relief. Yuki drank every cup he offered her afterward. The prince watched her expressionlessly. After one more cup he began dipping a cloth in the water he poured into the bucket. He squeezed out the excess liquid and handed it to Yuki.

"…?" Yuki didn't understand his gesture.

“You can apply this to the burns.”

“What?” Her eyes grew large.

Why? Why is this man being considerate after everything he has done?

He looked like nothing more than a disconnected person who seemed neither inclined to kindness nor hatred. Yet he was being genuinely kind to her.

Unable to endure the prickling pain any longer, she took the wet cloth and pressed it against her burns. She hissed at the touch. The cool wet towel provided desperate relief against the burning heat of her wounds.

“The day of your execution has been decided.”

“Huh?”

Execution. That was what he just said, right?

“It has been set for ten days from today—on the evening of the new moon. The official notice was sent out this morning. The news will make it to the front lines in about three to four days from now,” the young man informed Yuki, with the emotion of an unmoving stone.

Chapter 29

HOW *long has it been since Maruk's prince left?* Yuki wondered absentmindedly. Her mind was inevitably drawn to thoughts of her upcoming execution, the intense pain of her burns, Orga, and the friends she was separated from.

This isn't working. I need to break my situation down.

How had she ended up as Orga's captive? Why were the other countries so obsessed with controlling Rvydom's surviving citizens? Was there any way for her to return home? Would anyone come rescue her?

By the time she saw the sun rise to its highest point through the window in her room, Yuki was mentally exhausted. She sat up straight —as if that would help—as her mind drifted to the next set of questions plaguing her.

First things first, why was Orga in the grove? Hadn't Ain told me that Orga is the first in line to inherit the throne? And, as such, is always cooped up in the castle? Yet he set foot into the enemy country of Maruk. And he seemed to be on somewhat friendly terms with Maruk's prince. Didn't they say they were at war with each other? Are they actually on good terms?

Yuki shook her head.

I don't get it. Why would they go to war if they're on good terms? Ugh, it's no use. I can't solve that one. Next topic.

Yuki glanced down at her chest. The necklace her father—Kaito —gave her was gone. Kaito said to never let the ring dangling from the necklace out of her reach.

I'm sorry, Papa.

She lost Kaito's ring and her own ring.

That reminds me, when he said to use the ring in times of trouble, he didn't mean to sell it, did he? I totally thought he meant to use it in the place of money if the need arose. I wouldn't be in this big fat mess if he had told me to search for a Knight with it or taught me how to search for a Knight.

Well, even if he had me search for his Knight, Galian was imprisoned, so finding him would have been impossible without help. Which reminds me…

Yuki had the feeling Kaito had told her something else important.

What was it?

Before even five minutes passed after Kaito suddenly came out of the closet about being from another world, he pushed Yuki off the balcony. The hectic days and constantly changing circumstances over the months after that made it hard for Yuki to remember much of what he said in those brief few minutes.

I remember he said something that sounded like it was straight from a high-fantasy novel. Yuki placed her head on her hand and racked her brain. *He said something about his name in this world, right? What was it? If I'm not mistaken, it wasn't Kaito.*

Lord Cahn—Yuki remembered Galian calling out that name when her ring reacted to his.

That's right, it was Cah something. I'm not too far off.

Yuki was relieved she could remember a piece of what Kaito told her. Then it hit her.

That's not it! That's not the important part! Remember! Remember, Yuki Kasuga!

She rolled around on the bed mumbling, "Hmm," when she suddenly heard a familiar voice.

"So Yuki, if you happen to manifest powers, you mustn't use them indiscriminately in front of others. Promise me you won't."

The voice sounded so real, as if he were speaking in the room with her, she jumped out of bed. She searched the room several times to make certain Kaito wasn't there.

"As if he would be," she sighed.

That's right, he mentioned something about powers. I didn't believe him one bit when he told me, but this world is something right out of a fantasy novel. Witches and monsters exist. Knights, mages, and perverted men with fox ears exist. With all of that, it wouldn't be too strange for there to be something like super powers.

"If you happen to manifest powers…" Kaito had said.

Does that mean I haven't manifested them yet? What kind of powers? Is it something along the lines of what the Knights receive when they bond with a Master? Or will I end up something akin to the Witches? Either way, I haven't the slightest idea what it may be. I wish they would manifest now and allow me to fly right out the window.

The curtain hanging over the window billowed in the wind. Yuki went out onto the connected balcony, but her prison room was up higher than her condo in Tokyo—it didn't look possible to scale the wall down. She considered pulling down the curtains and tying them into a rope, but even if she connected it with the sheets it wouldn't be long enough to reach anywhere near the ground, so she gave up on the idea.

Where is this place? Yuki couldn't tell where she was, because all

she saw when she looked down were mountains extending as far as the eye could see.

In the end, I'm ignorant and powerless. I haven't a clue about where I am right now or the severity of the situation I'm in. I can't do anything.

Yuki rubbed her right hand's middle finger where Luca's ring once rested. Even the ring that once sat on her finger was gone now.

I really have lost everything. I've lost my connection to this world and what connected me with Luca and the others.

"This sucks…" Her voice came out hoarse and sounded funny.

It really does suck. I'm ignorant and powerless. No matter how I struggle to do my best, I can only get in their way. I've been with Luca for such a long time now, but I don't even know his age, hobbies, or what he likes to eat. And yet…and yet—how could I want him to come and save me this badly?

She felt dizzy, and decided to return back to her bed. Did her burns cause a fever?

"This sucks."

Was it because of the fever or because of self-loathing that heat and tears rose to her eyes? Yuki fell back onto her bed and breathed shallow breaths until she finally fell asleep.

***

A precise border existed between the three countries on Aridol. The mountain range divided the entire continent. Shaped like a large Y, the mountains created a border across the continent of Aridol. To the west was Adolunde, the east was Maruk, and to the confined north nestled at the top of the Y was Rvydom. Since ancient times countless wars between the countries occurred, but in the end the mountain range always remained the dominant borderline between the countries.

It was necessary to pass over the mountains to return to Adolunde from Cele. Cele was Maruk's southernmost city, so it was possible to travel by ship on the sea, but regrettably Luca did not have that kind of time. He informed Tita and Nasette to be considerate of the elderly Dante and Galian and travel by ship instead.

Luca and Ain were racing through one of mountain passes and over the border by horse. They ran into a messenger at a small village they stopped at to rest on their way. It must have been quite the urgent message, because Luca soon realized that other messengers were stationed in nearly every single town and village in the vicinity.

The official notice read: "The deliberation will be held at Adolunde Castle ten days from now on the night of the new moon."

Ten days would definitely not be enough time to make it from

Cele to Adolunde Castle by normal means. Furthermore, while the official notice stated it would occur in ten days, the new moon was only nine days away from the time Luca came across the notice.

"Brother is merciless," Luca said with a derisive snicker.

Ain nearly said, "Please share some of your composure with me."

I'm glad I didn't say it, Ain thought.

Ain was relieved, because while Luca laughed, his eyes weren't laughing at all.

Prince Luca is his usual self.

Rather than a sour look on his face, he was expressionless. Only the glint in his eyes was abnormally sharp. This was the Luca Ain was used to always seeing. Recently, and likely because of Yuki's presence, Ain felt the air about him had started to mellow. However, there wasn't even a glimmer of a soft expression on his face now.

Or is it for Yuki's sake he's become this frantic?

As usual, Ain hadn't a clue what his stiff-faced master was thinking. However, the speed he galloped his horse was several times faster than usual. It was like torture to Ain who didn't travel well on horseback—he failed his horseback riding lessons before. By the time he realized it, Luca had galloped quite a distance ahead of him.

"Wait, Prince Luca! Please, please wait just a little bit for me to catch up!" Ain cried rubbing his sore unused thigh muscles.

Chapter 30

PADIMATE absently stared down at the girl. She was still asleep and appeared to be in great pain. The girl slept for three days straight. Padimate assumed the burns on her chest were the cause, but he had no idea what to do about it and settled for cooling her forehead and cleaning the burns on her chest with a wet cloth.

Whenever he could find the time, Padimate would visit the highest floor of Cele's Prison Tower and place a fresh cloth against her forehead and chest. The girl moaned and scratched at the blistered burns, so he tied her wrists and fastened them to the bed.

He placed dried fruit and wheat crumbs in an easy to spot location she could reach with her hands tied, that way she could eat something as soon as she woke up—whenever that may be... However, there were no traces of her having touched the food even once over the past three days.

She hasn't opened her eyes since the first day we spoke. At this rate, she may very well die on us before the day of her execution. This girl will die not while being executed as a Witch but from natural causes.

Padimate closed his eyes once before opening them to look at the girl again. Her face was furrowed and twisted with a pain he could only imagine. He had continually gazed at her face over the past three days.

No, ever since that day. Ever since the day Orga planted the Licorice flower bud on her chest. Her body seems to be naturally rejecting the seal —almost as if every part of her being is desperately insisting she is not a Witch.

But Padimate knew better—there was nothing he could do for her. The girl continued to moan in agony.

At this rate, will she die before she is propped up as a sacrificial doll before the people as the Legendary Witch?

"…That might be for the best though," Padimate muttered as he wiped away the bangs sticking to the sweat on her forehead.

***

EVERYTHING was swaying to and fro—swaying like grass in the

wind. Backs were lined up next to each other—everyone Yuki knew and cared about stood with their backs to her. Yuki sat in the middle of them.

"Papa!" The familiar gray hair swayed in front of her. "Papa! Hey, I'm in a bit of a mess now. Tell me more about your world!"

The gray hair wavered and swayed. "You're fine, Yuki. You're my kid after all."

"I'm not fine. I'm not fine at all, Papa! Please tell me!" she pleaded. Kaito still wouldn't turn around to look at her.

"Mama!" Yuki shouted when she saw the back of her mother's head.

"You'll be fine, Yuki. You're your Papa's daughter after all. Grow up big and strong in that world and find yourself a good man," her mother Nobuko said with her back to her.

"Mama! I haven't grown up! I'm not any bigger! Hey, listen to me! I haven't gotten any bigger!"

"You're fine, Yuki. I mean, look at you. You're able to challenge Luca and say what's on your mind to him. That is real strength," Tita said, her curly hair brushing her shoulders as it swayed.

"Nothing left for you to be scared of when you can challenge Prince Luca like that," Ain agreed, his back to Yuki as well.

"Ahaha! You're amazing, Little Miss!" Nasette joined in.

"That's not true!" Yuki shouted.

That's not true. I'm actually always afraid. I've always suffered from an inferiority complex. It's no different now. I shrink back from others because I'm fed up with my own frailties and always end up sitting in solitude like this. I've always been waiting. Waiting for someone to save me. Waiting for someone to comfort me. Waiting for someone to need me.

"It's okay. You're a strong girl, Yuki," Nobuko encouraged.

"That's right, my Yuki is a very good girl," Kaito agreed.

"Yuki is so amazing," Tita praised.

"I am envious of you, Yuki," Ain confided.

"Our Little Miss sure is reliable," Nasette affirmed.

Stop it.

"…Don't put it like that," Yuki pleaded.

You're wrong. I'm not that great. I'm more abject, more incorrigible, and even more dark, closed-off, and weak than that. There's nothing praiseworthy about me. There's not a single thing worth relying on me for. I'm always in pain. I'm always sad. I'm always, always desperately holding myself back from breaking down.

Swaying, wavering, to and fro. The world swayed. The place Yuki stood swayed to the point she could barely stand upright.

Swaying, wavering, to and fro. Beautiful golden locks of hair swayed like a ripple on the water's surface.

“Luca,” she choked out his name.

Swaying, wavering, to and fro. His body was swaying. A swaying hand leisurely thrust in front of Yuki. Surely that hand—his hand—wouldn’t lie to her.

Yuki’s anxiety, her confusion, everything making her suffer—was all held tightly by that hand. Surely, that chilly hand would cool down the mess of emotions boiling inside her. She tried to stretch out her right hand to take his, but her left hand yanked her back with such force she toppled over. Her hand was connected to something she couldn’t get free from.

“No way.”

Swaying, wavering, to and fro. The hand held out to her slowly pulled away.

“No.”

Don’t go. Please, don’t go.

Tears rolled down her cheeks.

“No…I don’t want this. Hey, Luca!”

The swaying and wavering head of blond hair turned back to face her—there stood a person with no face. The others all turned around one-by-one. Everyone looked down at Yuki—who had fallen on the ground—with featureless faces.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!” Yuki screamed, and the world crumbled into black shards before her eyes.

***

YUKI once heard there were people who wake up to the sound of their snoring. When was it that she had laughed thinking it wasn’t true? Well, now she was more likely to believe it, because she woke up to the sound of herself screaming. She was confused as to what was going on as tears rolled down her cheeks. Sobs spilled ceaselessly from her mouth. Her sobs were more of a wailing moan than a noise made by her voice.

Frightened and wanting to escape from something, she twisted her body, but her arms were fastened above her head and wouldn’t budge. She was so confused only incoherent words made it out of her mouth. No matter how much she moved around, her arms were firmly secured above her and wouldn’t loosen.

“Nooo! No! Noooooooooo!”

What am I so scared of? What am I so sad about? Where am I?

Yuki was hyperventilating; it hurt to breathe. She could barely breathe. Air whisked through her throat with a weird whistling sound. She was in so much pain more tears poured from her eyes.

“I don’t want this…”

What don't I want? Yuki didn't even know the answer to that question, but the words of denial refused to stop spilling from her lips.

I can't take this anymore…

Her face was a mess from the tears and a runny nose. Her clothes were soaked from the sweat and clung uncomfortably to her skin. She repeated several shallow breaths, gradually calming.

A dream. It was a dream. A very nasty dream.

Even after she realized what she saw was a dream, her tears continued to flow without end. Only the whistling sound of her breathing as she sucked in each weary breath filled the silent room.

Chapter 31

A sliver of the waning moon hung in the sky like a candle piercing the darkness with its dulling light. The indigo blue dark shade of night was occasionally dyed white by the clouds hiding the moon's light.

The girl was still sleeping painfully when Padimate checked on her that morning. If she didn't wake up soon, she would truly die of a lack of food and water. Padimate slowly ascended the stairs with a tray of food. By the time he reached the top, only half of the soup's contents were left because of his inability to keep it from slopping over the side.

Is the girl awake? Padimate wondered, quietly opening the door and entering the room without a sound. He didn't hear the moaning he had grown accustomed to hearing when he entered her room. He looked at the bed and saw the girl lying on her side. Her eyes were open, but she was staring somewhere in an absent daze that didn't even register Padimate's presence.

A closer look revealed her sheets and blankets were messily kicked around and wrapped around her feet. The bright-red swelling on her wrists proved she recklessly pulled against her restraints until she rubbed her wrists raw.

"…Do all the princes of this world have too much free time on their hands? Is it okay for you to come so frequently from the royal castle to a place like this?"

A nasally twang could be heard in her quietly muttered words. Her voice was high-pitched as a young girl's should be.

"I've been entrusted to rule Cele as its governor. Besides, I can't let too many people see you until the designated time," Padimate answered. The girl's eyes rounded in surprise.

When his eyes met hers, she smiled and said, "I see you're the one who left the food and drinks for me. Thank you. Did you tie my hands back so I wouldn't claw at my wounds too?"

Padimate froze in shock.

She is right. But I didn't think she would be capable of calmly deducing her situation under these circumstances.

"I'm okay now, so can you please free me?"

Padimate placed the tray on the table next to her bed and freed her hands as she requested. A small amount of dried blood blotted her

raw wrists. The girl forced a sad smile when she saw the trail of dry blood.

"How long did I sleep for?" Her violet eyes looked straight at Padimate. The black color in the center of her eyes looked as if it could absorb the suffering of a world.

"You slept a full three days. It will be four days when morning comes."

"Four days, huh?" the girl quietly mumbled. "Only six more to go…"

The girl had a far more positive look in her eyes after the past three days of being ravaged by her fever than when he first met her. The anxious and hopeless expression coloring her features disappeared somewhere. Her voice was hoarse but defined.

What exactly happened to this girl? Padimate couldn't comprehend her change. The girl smiled playfully at Padimate who stood there outwardly stalwart—utterly confused by her reactions.

"Anyhow, is it okay for me to think this food is for me? I'm so hungry I feel like I could pass out. Oh, and I'm thirsty too. Also, I want to wash my face, but how should I go about that?" the girl boldly requested of him and sat on the edge of the bed. She pulled the tray on her lap and picked up the spoon, joyfully swinging her legs over the side.

He was at a complete loss—this was not how torture victims normally reacted…was it?

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YUKI was locked up in the highest part of a tower with nothing to do but gaze outside.

I feel kinda like Rapunzel.

"Rapunzel, huh?"

Rapunzel was kidnapped by the witch, but dangled her hair down the side of the tower for the prince to come up and rescue her. The fairytale claimed she had an inexhaustible supply of hair.

"…Even if my past eight years' worth of hair grew all at once, I doubt it would be enough to reach the ground."

Yuki peered down from the balcony. Unhindered by any clouds, the sun brightly shone on the ground below. Verdant plant-covered mountains and forests stretched as far as she could see. Hills were dotted with flowers; it truly was a beautiful sight, at least if she didn't consider her upcoming execution.

The previous night Padimate—Maruk's prince—gave her food, water, and even a bucket to wash her face with. The bathroom was just a hole in the floor, and part of her giggled at the thought of her

captors below having to deal with the mess.

She changed her clothes and went back to sleep. She stopped having nightmares after the first fever-hazed night. However, having spent several days without eating anything weakened her a great deal, and she spent the following two days in a trance with little movement. Finally, on the third day—today—she was able to stand without needing the walls for support.

"Oow," she whimpered.

Her wrists stung when she moved them. The bright-red swollen wound circled around her entire wrist. Her fever from the past few days left bony wrists and ribs poking out visibly around her chest. She looked frail, weak, and utterly starved.

Only three days left.

Those words spun through her head. Her hands, feet, and chest ached as an indescribable sense of unease surged within her.

Knowing you're going to die in three days is too surreal.

Despite how surreal it felt, fear loomed over her. She felt as if she were going to be crushed by the invisible weight of emotions, and if it didn't crush her, it may drive her mad first.

"I mean, why'd I even come to this world in the first place? Aaah."

Yuki stared at the sky from where she sat on the balcony and squinted. The sky looked artificial to her in the way it lacked cyan.

I'm here because Papa was from this world. But is that really the only reason? In all the fantasy stories I know of, the hero is either accidentally summoned to another world or summoned because they're needed. Or they're like the exact match to the person from that world's legends.

In comparison to those heroes I…have nothing. I really am powerless. I haven't been gifted with some special power. I merely recklessly and cheekily barged into this world. If there really is a reason for me to be here…If there's a reason I'm needed in this world…

"I'd be really happy," Yuki muttered.

No matter what the reason may be, if there was a reason for her existence in this world, wouldn't that mean it was okay for her to continue being there? Right now that was what she wanted more than anything else—a reason, a purpose for being here.

Chapter 32

LUCA and Ain kept their horses at a fast gallop. They traveled over the mountains, slipped past the front lines of the war, and headed straight for Adolunde Castle. They only stopped at towns and villages once their food supplies ran out, otherwise they stuck to the main road and the fastest routes available.

They had camped for the past three days, but tonight they were finally going to stay at an inn. The town was the last stop before Adolunde. They arrived at the town too late to resupply, so they decided to spend the night at one of the local inns instead.

Ain could barely move when he arrived at his room—staying mounted on a galloping horse for days on end with little rest had thoroughly exhausted him.

"I obviously lack stamina…" Ain muttered, rubbing his calves on top of the simple inn bed. The muscles in his legs and thighs were tense.

"Prince Luca has some serious stamina. I wonder whether this is where a bonded Knight's Favor comes into play."

Ain was alone in the room as Luca was out resupplying what he could. Ain tried to stop him from going by saying, "I cannot allow our country's prince to do the shopping."

"It's obvious the person who can move would do all the moving," Luca had curtly refused. To Ain's great embarrassment, he could barely stand at the time of the conversation.

Ain and Luca had drastically different upbringings. Luca was royalty, but being the fourth prince lowered his value as a pawn to his relatives who paid him little heed. Thanks to being born fourth, he learned swordsmanship from a young age and was allowed to practice and duel with adults twice his size. Thus, as the years passed he rapidly excelled at swordsmanship and took the rare and coveted rank of Violet Knight—a rank that only a handful of people held throughout the continent of Aridol.

On the other hand, as the youngest son in an elite family of Mages, Ain was condemned a failure for his lack of ability compared with the rest of his bloodline and was not highly valued by upper society. However, unlike Luca, Ain resigned himself to the level others held him to and loafed around, instead of honing his skills and

proving them wrong.

I wonder whether I should have learned swordsmanship.

Ain thought about learning the sword ten, no, hundreds of times over the years. But it was too late for him now. Luca didn't toss Ain aside, even though everyone else—Ain included—considered him a failure.

I haven't even graduated from the Mage Academy yet.

Ain came of age and was summoned to serve Luca before he could graduate from the Mage Academy set up to officially recognize someone as a Mage. At the time, Luca was eighteen and Ain fourteen. It was around the time the cease-fire treaty was sealed between Maruk and Adolunde, and everyone was eager to restore their war-torn countries.

Normally, a master would not be assigned a retainer younger than him. Yet Luca was given the Revent Family's failure of a Mage son as his retainer. Being assigned Ain proved just how low ranked everyone considered Luca.

It's been four years since then…I've had a productive and satisfying daily life since.

Time passed by in a flash; Luca would manipulate Ain constantly so he could run away whenever he wanted to. Ain couldn't help but chuckle when he thought back on what happened in their past together.

"Haha, I'm being led around by him now too."

On the other side of all the merriment clung countless forms of anxiety for Ain.

I'm supposed to be the retainer, but I rely on my master. I'm supposed to be the retainer, but I'm slower at obtaining information than my master. I'm supposed to be the retainer, but I'm rebuked by my master. I'm supposed to be the retainer…I'm supposed to be the retainer and yet…

"…I wonder whether I'm of any use to Prince Luca," his fragile whisper faded into the air like the chime of a bell on a windy day.

***

EVERY Mage possessed their own crystal, which they kept on their person at all times. Through the crystal they were able to contact other Mages elsewhere. The distance and precision of the contact changed based on the talent of the Mage. If the Mage had little skill with precision, they could send only text messages through the crystal. Mages with high skill in precision could send their voice through the crystal, and if both Mages were skilled, they could even converse through a projected image of themselves.

"Does being a Mage mean you can summon objects, people, and

the like too?" Yuki excitedly asked Ain that absurd question in what now felt like was ages ago to him.

"It does not. A Mage is just one of the official positions available for civil servants of the country. Well, it is a special position that is greatly determined by one's talent and base qualities. A Mage's primary job is to pass along information and prepare medicines. The rest is predominantly broken down based on each person's particular skills. It is said there are even Mages who can heal and read the signs in the stars and wind," Ain had explained to her.

Unfortunately for Ain, he wasn't one of the Mages gifted with a special ability. Furthermore, his skills in precision weren't high nor did his distance reach too far. Now that he was near Adolunde's royal capital, he could receive messages from his friends in Adolunde. One of the friends who contacted him was overly excited and didn't notice how uninterested the exhausted Ain was in his small talk. However, one of his friend's messages said something unthinkable.

"Huh?" Ain accidentally responded to the message he received.

"…The Legendary Witch has at long last been captured by Maruk?" Ain heard Luca say as the door opened. Ain wanted to sigh when he looked up at his master's stiff face.

He already knows? Just how does he procure information?

Luca's skill in gathering information was second to none in Ain's opinion.

"We were set up."

"Huh?"

Luca briskly walked into the room and grabbed the mantle he hung on the coat rack. "The Legendary Witch is most likely Yuki. A girl with violet eyes was dragged into Maruk by someone. Her appearance, age, and violet eyes are the same as the Legendary Witch."

"No way."

Yuki was framed as the Legendary Witch? Just like when we had her pretend to be the Witch in Fol?

The crystal pinged and gave off a faint light. Ain was speechless when he glanced down at his crystal.

"Apparently the Witch's execution is set for the evening of the new moon. Are you going to watch?" Ain's friend's message read.

"You have got to be kidding me," Ain said in disbelief.

Yuki wasn't a Witch—Ain and Luca knew that better than anyone.

Plus, Yuki being executed as a Witch means—

Ain lifted his head again.

Her execution is the day of the new moon. That's the same day as Luca's deliberation. It's obvious that if Luca doesn't adhere to the exact

day, the suspicion of his treason will change to them believing he's admitting to it by his absence.

Ain looked straight into his master's cold eyes. He knew exactly what his master would say.

"I'm going to Maruk," Luca declared.

See? I knew it. Ain wanted to praise himself for being right.

Ain took a deep breath and put strength into his abdomen when he said, "You will not."

Ain's voice was loud and defined, but Luca showed no signs of paying him any heed as he put his things together.

"You mustn't, Prince Luca," Ain declared a second time.

I'm sorry, Ain apologized in his heart.

"Prince Luca, please think of your own standing and situation. If you do not return to Adolunde Castle right now you will be deemed guilty of the suspicion cast on you for the attempted murder of your brother, Prince Orga. Please think only of proving your own innocence, Prince Luca!"

I'm sorry, Yuki. Yuki's always smiling, adorable face appeared in his mind. *It's not that I don't want to protect you.*

Yuki had protected Ain. She stood up for him. Yet Ain could do nothing for her. If anything, he was directing the one person who could do something away from her.

"Prince Luca, please return to Adolunde Castle."

Surely the master standing before him could do something to save her. Ain had no guarantee of it, but Luca was the kind of person who could make the impossible possible.

"…I will go to Maruk," Ain said.

Luca had his back turned to Ain the whole time until those words —he finally looked back at Ain.

Prince Luca can't save you. So please bear with me in his place, Yuki.

Chapter 33

HOW long had she been in Aridol? Was it just a few months? Less than a dozen? Yuki didn't know. The one thing she could say for sure was she had never thought about her death before she came to this world—never expected the way she would die would be by execution.

***

YUKI heard the door unlock. Padimate stood in the doorway with a tray of food. First he looked at the bed then around the room when he realized Yuki wasn't there. He blinked several times when his eyes met Yuki's on the balcony.

"…Are you all right?" he asked. She was certain he was a little surprised, even if his expression didn't show any signs of it.

Yuki smiled. "I'm excellent; just enjoying the fresh air. It's already time for lunch, huh?"

Padimate placed the tray on the table beside her bed. The soup had spilled half its contents as usual. Yuki sat on the side of her bed and pulled the tray on top of her lap.

"Thanks for the food," Yuki said, placing her hands together in prayer. Padimate stood there watching her in a bewildered daze.

His eyes had rounded with surprise the first time he saw her pray before her meal, but he seemed to have grown accustomed to it. Yuki ate with gusto. She hadn't moved much since her fever, causing her to lose a significant amount of muscle and fat.

I need stamina if I want to run away. I can't stay unmoving and reluctant forever. No matter how much I worry and think about it, the day of my execution isn't going to get postponed. In that case, I'll fight back with everything I've got in me. I mean, I'm not even the actual Legendary Witch. It's not even laughable to be killed for a nonsensical misunderstanding. The more Yuki thought about it, the angrier she became.

"Everything is all the perverted, lunatic Orga's fault."

What exactly does he want from an ignorant, powerless, weak little girl?

Yuki suddenly felt those light-blue eyes on her.

"…You too. Are you actually just bored?" she asked Padimate.

He told her he was in charge of governing Cele. Yuki wondered whether it was okay to think of Aridol's governors in the same manner as Japan's. Yuki waited a long time for him to answer her, but he didn't. She sighed.

"…Fine, be that way. I guess it's okay for me to think you're bored and have too much time on your hands?" Yuki said, and then it dawned on her.

Now that I think about it, I don't know his name. We haven't even introduced ourselves.

Yuki looked up at the man she constantly referred to as the man with glass marble-like eyes.

"Hey, my name is Yuki Kasuga. What's your name?"

Yuki couldn't tell what he was thinking when her eyes met his.

"…Vul Padimate Maruk," he muttered.

She hadn't expected an answer, so she was shocked he said something.

"Ul…pa…what? What should I call you?" Yuki asked after stammering out his name. The foreign name didn't sound close to anything she knew in Japanese or English.

"Padi is acceptable."

"Padi. Padi. Padi," Yuki repeated. She gazed into Padi's eyes. "Hey, Padi? I'm just curious, but why are Witches executed?"

"……"

The silent treatment, huh?

Yuki once learned from Ain that there was a large-scale Witch Hunt in the past. She forgot to ask the reason at the time and sighed over not knowing now. She gazed out the balcony window and listened to the sound of the wind.

"…Witches bring insanity," Padi's hollow voice rode on the wind and reached Yuki's ears. Surprised, she glanced over at him—his gaze was unfocused. "They claimed Witches drive people to madness."

The first time Yuki saw Padimate she thought he was terribly devoid of anything. As she gradually came to know him, she found he was a very kind person.

But he's still devoid of emotion. Lifeless—that word fits him best.

"…I don't know if that is really true though."

Oh, he even gave his own opinion on the topic! Yuki stared at Padimate. *What exactly does a person with a doll-like face that never changes expression think about? What exactly made him this way? I kind of want to know.*

Padimate stared at Yuki for a while before opening his mouth. "Are you…not afraid?"

"Huh? …Afraid of what?"

Padimate blinked several times. He cocked his head to the side as if to say he thought something was out of place with her answer. “Are you not afraid of me? Are you not afraid of your own mortality—of being executed?”

Yuki was the one shocked by the unexpected question this time. “I’m not particularly scared of you, Padi. It’s true I thought you were a terrible person at first, but I don’t think so now. I mean, you bring me my meals and lack any real rancor toward me. No, I blame that nut Orga for my predicament,” she said, smiling at Padimate. “As for the execution…yeah…”

Her words trailed off.

To be honest, I’m uneasy. I’m uneasy, anxious, and scared. Why must I have this fate? Why did I even come to this world in the first place? My indescribable loneliness, the existence or nonexistence of my necessity to others, the sheer extent of meaninglessness I feel—I’m scared, so scared of these things I can’t stand it.

But…if I think being executed is my fate—if I make myself believe that—I can’t seem to hate it. I’m scared of dying. So horrified and scared I want to flee. But what if my dying like this will bring peace to this war-torn world? Thinking my death might mean something positive for this world…I just don’t know how to fight it anymore.

“…I wonder whether my dying will save anyone,” Yuki said, wondering whether that was the answer he sought from her.

“I’ll happily lay down my life and die if my dying means someone somewhere will be saved,” Yuki confided, smiling at his lifeless eyes. She wasn’t confident her smile was convincing.

I’m lying. Obviously I’m scared. She wanted to cry.

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YUKI gazed at the night sky from the tower’s balcony. Watching as the sliver of a moon gradually disappeared, helplessness weighed heavily on her. Starlight dominated the night’s sky—the moon nearly gone from her sight. Truly the scene before her was a vision of beauty. A sight she would be able to see at home in only the most remote of locations.

Yuki glanced over her shoulder when she heard a knock. The door opened without waiting for a response. Padimate stood in the doorway with a tray.

“…Your food.” Padimate didn’t say anything else before placing the tray on the table beside the bed.

“Thank you,” Yuki responded, though she didn’t feel like rushing over to eat at the moment.

"……"

Silence fell over the room. The white lace curtains fluttered in the occasional breeze through the open balcony door.

The stars are twinkling, Yuki thought, placing her arms on the railing and gazing up at the night sky. She sensed something stir behind her and looked back. Padimate had come to the center of the room and stared at her.

"I was looking at the stars. Want to join me?"

Padimate walked right over and stood beside her on the balcony. She glanced at him and saw him staring at the night sky.

Yuki returned her attention to the sky. She didn't know much about the constellations on Earth, so she wasn't sure what differences existed among the stars in Japan and the stars she saw in Aridol.

But stars actually exist here and don't look much different aside from a few extra colors and the brightness.

"What a curious thing," Yuki mumbled quietly to herself.

"…Hey, did you know," Padimate's eyes turned toward Yuki as she spoke, "that the light we see coming from these stars right now is actually light from a long, long time ago?"

Yuki looked at Padimate, but he just blinked several times as if to say he didn't comprehend what she was saying.

"They say the light we see right now took years to reach our skies," Yuki grinned and looked back at the stars. "That's why there's a chance some of the light we see in this vast starry sky may come from stars that have long since vanished."

They continue twinkling brighter than ever now that they're gone.

"I'm kinda envious of the stars. Hahaha," Yuki laughed, when a noticeably strong wind blew past them. Clad in only her nightgown made the night wind chilly enough to give her goose bumps.

"That was cold! …Guess I'll eat."

Yuki glanced at the glass-like eyes whose color she couldn't see in the dark, when Padimate opened his mouth. "Don't you want to look a little longer?"

He pulled the string on the cloak wrapped around his shoulders and placed it on Yuki. Gradually, the warmth soaked up by the cloak spread across her back.

"Th-Thanks."

They gazed at the stars for a little while longer as night turned to day.

***

HOW much time had passed since Padimate left her room? Yuki didn't

know. She knew she had to think about how to escape, but her mind seemed to refuse thinking in the way she wanted.

Maybe I came to this world to become a living sacrifice? Yeah right, Yuki laughed at herself.

"The reason I'm in this world is because of Papa and Mama's whim…or more like a conspiracy between them," Yuki said, depressed with herself as she wrapped her arms around her legs. "That's why, Yuki, you don't have to die."

"You can't die. You shouldn't die. You're not supposed to die," she repeated. Repeating those words more than she could count to convince herself, helped calm her a little.

Oh yeah, this happened once before.

Now it seemed like the distant past to Yuki, even though it wasn't that long ago. She was thinking back to the night before they invaded Cele's prison. Yuki calmed the sobbing Tita and went in her place.

I was desperate and gave in to self-abandonment to say something like, "It doesn't matter if I die." And yet I'm scared of dying now.

"Haha, I'm so weird," Yuki laughed.

Why am I so contradictory?

It was true she thought she wouldn't mind dying for someone else. It was also true she didn't want to die.

"Aaaaaah, geez. I want to start over again from the beginning."

I want to start over from the very first moment I came to this world. It's almost nostalgic now. I want to do everything over again from the beginning—from the point I was saved by Luca, being brought to Adolunde's castle, making a bonding contract with Luca while I hadn't a clue about what was going on—all of it.

"But then again, depending on where I fall, I could end up homeless or sold somewhere…" Yuki thought it over.

"…I'll pick you up." Yuki recalled the words Luca said to her that night on the rooftop. *"If you fall somewhere again, I'll pick you up and make another contract with you."*

Suddenly, she started laughing freely without a hint of despair. Something warm filled her chest and spread through her.

"…Right."

Luca will pick me up again. She felt as if her clamoring heart was instantly relieved. *He thinks if I'm lost I'll end up somewhere near him again.*

"I wonder if something poisoned me into thinking I had to give in," she laughed.

I know, if I'm gonna die anyway, I should just leap with the intention to die again. And that way I can redo everything from the start. If I do that I can return to Adolunde Castle—to the place I know everyone is.

Yuki hopped off the bed and slowly walked. She quietly passed under the lace curtains and opened the door to the balcony. Her pure white dress billowed in the wind. The sun was no longer anywhere in sight and the depths of the sky were gradually turning a dark blue. The gradient orange of the sky was a beautiful sight to behold.

She placed her hands on the railing and looked down. She was familiar with this height.

It's not much different from the height of our condo on the fourteenth floor in Tokyo.

The home she had lived her entire life felt nostalgic to her now. She got terribly dizzy looking down when her parents carried her out onto their balcony for the first time.

Now Yuki was locked up in the highest part of a tower with nothing to do but gaze upon the outside world.

I felt like I was Rapunzel.

"Who's Rapunzel?" she mocked herself.

Yuki's prince wouldn't come to the bottom of this tower for her.

Because…

"Upsy-daisy," Yuki said as she placed her hands on the railing to stabilize herself.

"My prince is a sourpuss with a dual personality after all!"

Yuki smiled dryly when she remembered the blinding smile he flashed her when they first met.

"I have to be the one to go and meet that twisted prince of mine." She put her other foot on the railing and sat down with her legs dangling off the side of the balcony. Her hands were covered in sweat as she squeezed the railing.

Don't look down. If you look down your resolve will flitter away.

Yuki took two-deep breaths then pushed off the railing with both hands. She floated airily into the sky, which was directly followed by a sharp impact to her body.

Chapter 34

PADIMATE opened the door and peered inside just as Yuki climbed onto the balcony railing.

What is she—

His body understood what she was doing faster than his mind did. He dropped the food tray. Yuki's legs were dangling off the side of the railing. Padimate dashed through the room.

The balcony should be right there—close enough to reach in time—but the room felt massive to him. Yuki was falling forward by the time Padimate exited onto the balcony.

"I have to be the one to go and meet that twisted prince of mine."

Padimate frantically stretched out his arms. The girl floated in the air. He hung over the ledge and wrapped both arms around her stomach as she fell. He crashed into the railing from the speed he reached out for her with.

"…!" He groaned with pain. Yuki struggled in his arms.

"Eh? Huh? What? …Huh?" Yuki babbled in shock.

Padimate heaved her up and found himself squeezing her in his arms.

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THE moon was gradually waning. The lanterns lighting the room swayed in the wind.

Will I be executed on the day I can no longer see the moon?

Padimate discovered Yuki just as she leapt off the balcony and stopped her before she fell out of reach. He shackled her feet so she couldn't jump off the balcony again. The chain connected to her shackles was secured to the bed and had a moderate length that didn't hinder her as she moved around the small room, but it prevented her from ever setting foot on the balcony again.

"This is a problem," she sighed. It's not like she was trying to commit suicide, but that's what Padimate took her little stunt for.

But I guess that's to be expected.

However, the situation wasn't so kind as to be cheerfully summarized away by logically accepting what Padimate did. Yuki's movement and chance to escape was further stripped from her. If she continued to do nothing, the day of her execution would come.

It was fairly late at night, but because she had done nothing but sleep lately, she was in an oddly excited state that didn't allow for sleepiness.

"What should I do?" Yuki folded her arms and titled her head.

The only door was locked. Even if she broke through it somehow, she didn't doubt she would get captured before she made it to the bottom of the massive tower. Aside from the balcony, there was no other way out of the room. She couldn't jump out the window anymore either.

…I guess this is where I have to wait with high expectations that the powers Papa talked about will awaken? I have no clue how to even manifest them. I wonder whether I need training or something similar to activate them.

Yuki mulled it over but couldn't come up with a good idea. Knowing her life was on the line caused fear to jumble her thoughts.

"I knew it, it's no good. I can't think of anything." She rolled over in bed and sulked.

The hard mattress pushed into her cheeks. She unconsciously rubbed the base of her right hand's middle finger—there was no cool metal of a ring to soothe her raging emotions.

Three days left, huh? I really don't have any time left.

"What is the last thing you would want to do if you knew you were going to die tomorrow?"

Yuki remembered that was one of the survey questions collected for her high school graduation yearbook. At the time, she never imagined the question would apply so soon to her in real life.

What did I write?

She remembered she just wrote whatever came to mind. Her friends laughed, "Seriously! That's what you'd do? No way!"

Yuki longed for those peaceful days.

Yuki could hear the gentle swish of wind. The lace curtains fluttered as clean air filled the room. The weather was gradually getting warmer so she slept with the balcony door open. Stars twinkled in the distant night sky. An unreliable sliver of a moon hung inconspicuously in the sky.

Yuki closed her eyes and sighed. Her eyes flickered opened when she heard the clink of the door unlocking over the sound of the wind.

Padi? Padimate hadn't visited her in the middle of the night since the day she recovered from her terrible fever. *Did something happen?*

She slowly sat up and glanced at the door. There were no signs of it opening.

Did he accidentally spill all the soup this time? The possibility crossed her mind until she remembered she had already finished dinner.

Could it be a late-night snack? Is he planning on spoiling me during the last days before my execution? I feel like dinner was more extravagant than usual.

Worry, anticipation, and a little hunger overwhelmed her as she watched the door. The door slowly cracked open without a sound. The face she saw in the doorway was not Padimate's.

Who is it?

Someone was peering inside the room. The air in the room abruptly changed. The person's eyes seemed to be looking around, inspecting the room. Suddenly, their eyes sharply met Yuki's where she sat on the center of the bed.

"…Who are you?" Yuki asked dubiously.

Padimate told her he didn't want others to see or know about her. That's why she believed no one would enter her room aside from him. Padimate was Maruk's prince, and she didn't think he was the type to lie. So she thought she could believe him. Yet someone unknown was looking into her room.

"Who are you?" she repeated with the displeasure of being ignored apparent in her voice.

The door slowly opened the rest of the way, revealing a young man around the same age as Yuki. The candlelight shone on his

stunning ultramarine color hair and masculine features. His ear-length hair rustled in the wind. The young man with a dead serious look on his face let out a long breath and smirked.

"I didn't think you'd still be up," he said and shrugged, further raising alarm bells in Yuki's mind.

Was he trying to sneak in while I slept? There's a limit to how much common sense you can lack. I may look like I'm ten, but I'm really an eighteen-year-old woman. And as seen with the pervy fox Isis, being ten isn't much to stop the men of this world either.

"Who are you? How did you get in here?"

The young man briskly walked into the room without hesitation. He leaned against the wall opposite of Yuki.

"Who am I, eh? It's not like this is your room. And it's not like I'd come here to sneak into your bed and ravish you," he declared matter-of-factly.

I-I know that, but still. I was given this room all to myself for the time being. Plus, it's really suspicious for someone to enter a room without permission.

"I just came here to have a look at the Almighty Legendary Witch I have to take care of starting tomorrow."

"Huh? Have you come to mock me in my final days?"

Take care of? I didn't mishear him, right?

"Where's Padi?"

Padimate had taken care of everything for Yuki until now. She thought he would continue to do so until the day of her execution.

The young man twitched and raised an eyebrow. "Padi…huh? I'm surprised Big Bro lets you call him that."

Big Bro? So this guy is Padi's younger brother?

"Big Bro will be busy preparing things for your execution from tomorrow onward, so he went out of his way to call me here all the way from Rvydom. You'd better be grateful."

From Rvydom?

The young man—who gave off the strong impression of the lazy type—swiftly walked over to Yuki and sat on the edge of her bed. He rapidly changed topics, pushing the conversation along as he pleased. "To think you aren't really the actual Legendary Witch. Are you a noble little girly from Adolunde? Or perhaps one from Rvydom?"

Viewing his face up close revealed his eyes to be the same ultramarine color as his hair.

"I'm neither one of those," Yuki answered.

"You don't have to lie about it, y'know? Not like anything is gonna change for you anyway," he said with a smirk and stood. He walked a few steps and spoke with his back to her, "You're gonna die as the Legendary Witch either way."

What a nasty personality. What did this nasty brat come here for in the first place?

Chapter 35

AIN'S thoughts were in disarray. What exactly made things turn out this way? What course of events lead to the mess they were in now? It all started when his own master Luca suddenly brought a girl—Yuki—and abruptly forced a contract on her to become his Master.

From there they proceeded to Fol with Yuki. Yuki played an important role in successfully recapturing Fol Castle without casualties. Ain later heard that when he messed up the timing to come to their rescue, Luca was captured by the traitor Isis and was almost locked away in the castle dungeons. Amid the chaos, Yuki pretended to be the Legendary Witch and the source of Isis' trauma, ending the whole debacle with his cowardly surrender.

Yuki saved Prince Luca, Ain thought.

She even helped Ain when Luca was going to leave him behind before heading to Cele with Nasette.

I was helped by the tiny girl who looks like she would be crushed if someone hugged her. At what point did things go awry? When Prince Luca contracted with her on a whim? When Prince Orga showed an interest in Yuki? When we brought Yuki to Fol? When we went to find Tita and Nasette? Were things already going awry before Yuki appeared?

Ain's memories spun as he tried to think back as far as possible to find where everything went wrong. He thought back to his childhood when he played with the others without a care in the world. At the time, they played without paying any heed to their statuses as prince, retainer, noble, and orphan.

Ain grew afraid of Luca when he became rough around the edges, so Ain stayed holed up in the Mage Academy's dormitory. He wished he had been with Luca at his greatest time of need, but it was far too late to regret it now.

Since when? Since when did this country take a turn for the worse? Why does it strive only for war? Why? Why has this world fallen into chaos? Ain shook his head and locked his gaze on what was in front of him.

Almost five days had passed since Ain and Luca went separate ways. Cele was within a stone's throw. Ain's thighs and buttocks cramped—he had long since forgotten the aching riding sores. His lower region was numb, removing all sense of feeling.

Please wait for me, Yuki, Prince Luca.

Ain wondered what that small girl—Yuki—was thinking in the days before her execution. *I will not let him lose another one.*

Ain tightened his grip on his horse's reins, willing his steed to hurry.

***

THE young man with ultramarine hair came early in the morning with Yuki's food. A part of her snickered at the thought of princes serving her. How many girls dreamed of being served by handsome princes? Although hers unfortunately all had either cold or irritating personalities—maybe she could ask for another? At least Orga hadn't chosen to serve her yet…She giggled at what her lot in life had become.

She was tired after staying up into the wee hours of the night, so she was dozing off from lack of sleep when the young man kicked the door open and strolled in.

"Hey! I went outta my way to bring ya food. Don't sleep through it!" he said haughtily, slamming the surprisingly full tray on the table by her bed. Was he better at carrying food than Padi? She snickered, eliciting a glare from the lazy prince.

He spun around and left the room for a moment, only to come back with a chair. Yuki groggily watched from bed as she picked at her meal.

"Man, you've sure got guts to peacefully sleep in when you're gonna be executed the day after tomorrow."

He's noisy too, Yuki thought sleepily. Padimate never spoke when he came, so her room was always filled with a subdued silence. The young man chucked something at Yuki. She lifted her head to see what it was when something cool went splat across her face.

"Wipe your face."

"Th-Thanks, but next time hand it to me!" she snapped.

It's a wet towel. He didn't have to throw it at me. He seemed so disgruntled over the whole thing yesterday too. Now he seems like a different person.

She glared at him.

"Hurry up and eat."

"Ah." She put both hands together in prayer saying, "Thanks for the food," and picked up the spoon on the tray.

The young man sat on the chair with his legs crossed—watching her.

"Ah," Yuki mumbled noticing something off when she pulled the tray onto her lap as she usually did.

“What? You’d better eat it all even if there’s food you don’t like,” the lazy prince said.

“Hm? Yeah, I will,” she replied, paying little attention to him.

There really is a lot more soup this time.

The soup was cold every other time she had it, but it was hot today. Before she knew it, she burst out laughing.

His actions and his attitude seem like they belong to different people.

Her hand stopped bringing food to her mouth. Once she started laughing she couldn’t stop.

“Pft! Ahahahaha!”

The young man furrowed his brow and glowered at her. “What’s wrong with you now?”

Yuki quickly shook her head. *He’s got a foul mouth and a terrible attitude, but he’s not half bad at properly looking after my needs.*

“Hey, what’s your name?” The words were out of her mouth before she thought about it.

“Huuh? Are you okay in the head? Eat in silence,” he ordered in response. Yuki reluctantly moved the spoon to her mouth.

The room was filled only with the clatter of Yuki’s spoon against the bowl and the bowl sliding across the tray. She ate in silence while enduring his stare.

I thought there was a chance he might be a good person too. I thought he’s just a bit rude and vulgar, but apparently that’s not the case.

His face was terribly grim when she made eye contact with him. It was as if he were looking at her with eyes filled to the brim with hatred and contempt.

He’s good at taking care of my needs, but he’s scary.

And then she realized it—the reason why he took care of her properly—he wasn’t the type to mix his personal feelings with his work. He despised Yuki. But taking care of her was his job right now and he was called all the way from Rvydom to do it. He would do it without fail. That was the kind of person he was.

“…Thanks for the meal,” Yuki said, breaking the silence. She was depressed and dispirited by the time she finished eating.

“……” The young man sat watching her in silence the whole time she ate. Now he finally opened his mouth, “Do you really understand you’re gonna die?”

“H-Huh?” she stammered over his sudden and unexpected question.

I’m going to die. I’ve thought about it countless times this past week. I’ve countlessly regretted that it came to this.

“I heard you tried to jump from the balcony the other night.”

He knew? Yuki stared at his ultramarine eyes.

“Why did you do it?”

"What…?"

"Why did you think about jumping and killing yourself? Do you hate the idea of dying for your country?"

Dying for my country?

"If you die as the Witch, we'll lose our reason to attack Adolunde," he explained.

Yuki was speechless.

What is this guy saying? How does pretending I'm the Legendary Witch and killing me stop the war between Maruk and Adolunde?

"You didn't realize the reason? The reason you're gonna be killed as the Witch. You've never thought of the significance of being killed as the Witch?"

His sudden barrage of questions confused her.

Huh? What? The war is going on because of the Witch? But how does killing me end the war? They know I'm not the real Witch.

"What do you mean? I don't get it," she said, to the young man's exasperation.

"This is why I hate nobles. You live in luxury under the protection and suffering of others, without knowing a thing about the real world. Sure you don't know—don't know a thing about anything and everything. Why don't you realize not being told anything is a sign of your own misfortune? Why don't you even try to realize it!" he shouted, bolting from his chair.

Yuki flinched and squeezed her eyes shut on a reflex. She could hear him approaching her. She was too scared to move. His contempt, hatred, disgust, and utter scorn petrified her.

"You don't know anything. You don't even know it's a crime not to know. You must've been quite happy in your palace, eh? Little Adolunde Noble."

He grabbed her hair with one hand. He seized her face with the other and forced her to open her eyes.

Why is he saying all this to me?

The twisted look in his ultramarine gaze reflected in Yuki's teary eyes.

"…! I never once…thought ignorance was…bliss," the words rushed from her mouth. Her voice trembled from sadness and anger. Yuki always thought of herself as ignorant, powerless, and pathetic. So why did she have to have someone she didn't know blame her for it? Especially when this wasn't even her world. It wasn't even her country he was telling her to die for.

"Then why did you try to jump to your death? If you're gonna die anyway, die for your country."

Why does everyone tell me to die? Orga told me to die. So does this boy whose name I don't know. And I thought I had finally found the

reason for my existence in this world. I even believed it was okay for me to be here.

Something snapped inside of Yuki.

"…I—" Yuki flapped both arms with all her strength. The palm of her right hand made a direct hit to his chin. He let go of her face and hair. "I don't want to die! I absolutely will not die!"

Perhaps what snapped was the dam blocking her tears—tears poured from her eyes.

Don't cry.

"…What was that, you stuck up little brat!"

"I won't deny my ignorance! I don't know anything! I don't understand anything! I-If my dying as the so-called Witch really—which I remind you I am not, meaning she still exists out there—really meant peace will come to this world, I'll die with pleasure! But you know!"

I don't know if this world is actually at war because of the Witch. Or what they're telling me is even true.

"Because of my ignorance, the only ones I know who will benefit from my death are the psychopath Orga and you. That's why I won't die for you!"

"…Nonsense!" he shouted.

"That's right. It is utter nonsense. This world is insane! You people keep telling me to die for you, and I refuse! Got a problem with it?"

The tense air between them lingered for several seconds until the young man sighed.

With a spiteful smile he said, "I get it… You're confident you won't get executed. Don't think anyone will come to save you."

He grabbed the tray and left the room. Yuki sunk into her bed once she confirmed he was gone.

"…What's his problem?" Yuki sniffled and sobbed, her sleeves growing wet from rubbing away her tears. The sky was spitefully sunny, contrary to the stormy state of her heart.

Chapter 36

AAH, *I've returned*, Luca thought absently. He often left Adolunde for long stretches of time. In his younger, carefree days he frequently let his personal desires keep him from returning. Now it was always his duty to return—no matter how he viewed the chains of obligations upon him—he pushed passed his personal desire and always came back.

Luca mustered what energy was left in his exhausted body to guide his horse through the city. The heavy foot traffic and bustle of day-to-day life in Adolunde's capital city made it easy to lose himself in his thoughts.

No one questioned him on his horse trotting among the throng of people. The few people who knew him were the merchants and tavern masters he did business with as a lowborn. Luca rarely appeared in the public eye as a prince.

Even when he led Adolunde's army as the Violet Knight, he wore a helmet that covered his hair and made it difficult to see his face. Despite being at war with Maruk, Adolunde's enormous royal capital was as lively as ever. Luca stared at the city, witnessing the price he paid for its prosperity.

I probably won't be able to leave for a while. Brother won't easily free my chains again. At this rate, I should just—no, that's a foolish idea, Luca thought self-derisively, stopping himself from getting any funny ideas. *I'm sure that's what he wants me to do.*

Luca couldn't understand what it was that Orga was trying to accomplish. Sooner or later, Orga would become king of Adolunde and he would gain all the glory and power he sought since the day they were born.

Well, it's not like I'd want to be king.

Orga was born to become king and was raised to be king. He was extolled as the wise future-king. Few doubted his suitability of becoming king. No one suggested any of his younger brothers try to lay claim to the throne.

What do you want to do with this country, Brother? What do you want to do with this prosperous, beautiful, and dear country? To the country she loved?

Luca closed his eyes when her delicate features appeared in his

mind.

***

GUARDS immediately seized Luca when he passed under the castle gates. He was yanked from his horse without resistance, restrained as a common criminal in heavy chains, and dragged in those same chains to the throne room with his arms shackled behind him. It was happening all over again, as it had once before.

"Hiya, Luca. You came?" Orga smiled elegantly from his throne atop the central dais.

"What is the meaning of this, Brother?"

Two armed guards stood behind Luca.

"What does it mean? Isn't that what I should be asking you, Luca?" Orga crossed his legs and lifted his chin as he looked down on Luca.

"To think the girl was a Witch. And an indentured one at that. I had no idea," he heaved an over exaggerated sigh.

What a transparent and blatant lie. You clearly know everything.

There was no doubt in Luca's mind that the man in front of him —Orga—was the one who kidnapped Yuki. There was no mistaking his victorious smirk—Luca's spies confirmed Orga had been away from the castle the last few days.

"Hey, Luca, why did you do such a thing?" he asked with a pained expression. A closer look at his face showed his eyes were filled with glee.

"Brother, she is not a Witch."

"Heh? Then why are her eyes that color? Are you going to continue speaking foolishly and claim Rvydom's king actually lived?"

"Yes," Luca strongly affirmed.

Yuki is going to get killed as things stand. The way to keep her alive is to give her life value in his eyes. Establishing Yuki's value to Orga was the only solution Luca could come to. He returned to Adolunde's capital city for this purpose.

"She is the sole daughter of Rvydom's king, King Leuco Cahn Rvydom."

Orga continued looking down at Luca without any visible reaction. Luca could sense the guards behind him cringing. Several moments of no reaction passed before Orga burst out laughing maniacally.

"How? How can you declare such a preposterous thing with certainty, Luca? Hmm? Rvydom's king is alive! Is that not the delusion of Rvydom's people?"

"She possesses the counterpart ring with Galian Manotant, the

Knight of Rvydom's king."

Orga laughed until his face crumbled into one of seriousness. His usual smirk was gone. His upper body suddenly jerked forward. With his chin resting on the palm of his hand and his head tilted at an awkward angle, Orga looked like nothing more than a foolish pauper on a throne to Luca.

"Hmm…I see…"

Silence reigned once more. By the time Orga straightened in his chair a smile was once again plastered on his face.

"So? What do you want to do with the girl, Luca? The war has begun already."

"…!" Luca's eyes widened in surprise. Orga laughed joyfully at the sight of Luca's shock.

"I finally gave the order to pursue this morning. An order for Adolunde's army to move forward."

What does that mean? Bringing Yuki back to Adolunde would mean a full-out war with Maruk. I took her out of Adolunde because I knew that would happen. I knew, so I hesitated to bring her back to Adolunde. My hesitation put her in danger. That's why I decided it would be inevitable for war to break out with Maruk if I saved Yuki. Yet why—

"I thought she could serve our country from here, but it's too much of a pain to keep such a brazen child under your thumb, you know?" Orga was playing with his hands like he didn't know what to do with them. He folded them, brought them together, pulled them apart, and repeated the gesture. Luca stared at Orga aghast.

"Brother!" he shouted despite his better judgment. Luca came to the castle to discuss the plan he had come up with, not to be pulled into Orga's pace. "In that case, why don't you use her as Rvydom's next Queen to restore Rvydom back to its former glory? And then if you marry her you can obtain all of Rvydom's territory without going to war."

Orga's smile was replaced by a serious look of contemplation. That expression was somewhat similar to Luca's.

"…I see. I guess that was one way to go about things too. But where is she now?" Orga asked. Luca didn't know how to answer. "You don't have any evidence she is not a Witch. She's not present, so you can't have her show me the ring that proves she's Rvydom's princess. And yet you're asking me to believe you, Luca?"

With no way to counter Orga, Luca fell silent.

"But, it is a good idea," Orga said staring dreamily into the distance, "marriage with Rvydom's lost princess would make for turbulent times indeed."

Is he going to accept my plan?

Orga smirked spitefully just as a faint hope blossomed for Luca.

“Since she’s not present, why don’t we set it up so that she’s the Witch getting executed in Maruk tomorrow? Once the Witch dies, we can claim, ‘The Witch executed in Maruk was actually Rvydom’s Princess that Adolunde was protecting.’ With that reason on our side we can invade Maruk with a just cause. Not only will we gain Rvydom for protecting their princess, but also Maruk for killing her. Isn’t it just a splendid little scheme?”

That was his aim all along?

“Brother! Do you understand what it is you are trying to do!” Luca accidentally shouted. The guards came up on both sides of him and shoved him into the marble floor.

“Luca, you are under suspicion for attempting to kill me. Didn’t you come here to vindicate yourself? My, how kind you must be to worry about me in your situation.” Orga gallantly stood from his throne. Step by step he slowly descended from the dais. He stopped steps in front of Luca’s face.

“Well, now that I think about it, a prince being under suspicion for attempted murder doesn’t sound good, so I’ll keep you under heavy guard until this Rvydom Princess you speak so highly of comes to see me. I’m sure your enthusiasm will cool down by then.”

As long as the Witch being executed was Yuki, there was no chance of Yuki ever coming to see them.

He set it up this way, and I walked right into his trap.

“Hey, Luca? I love you, Luca, so I’ll do everything in my power to find a way to save you. So wait just a little while for me to help you, okay?” Orga said with a horrendously twisted expression.

Chapter 37

AIN arrived in Cele the evening before the day of the new moon. The sky was dyed indigo on one side and orange on the other, dyeing the gray city of Cele in a maddening red.

Where's Yuki? Ain wondered, pulling his horse behind him as he walked through Cele. He walked unsteadily. It was hard to tell whether he was pulling the horse or the horse was pulling him.

Where is Yuki? He could think of nothing else. He assumed his blurry vision was from fatigue. He couldn't even walk straight.

For now I need to get a room and a stable for my horse. Aaah, how should I find Yuki? Should I start by trying to figure out her whereabouts? I wonder whether the guards will tell me if I bribe them again. They told me last time, so it should go okay. But the real problem at hand is how to rescue her.

Ain's mind teetered at the edge of exhaustion. Just as he thought of something, he forgot it.

It's impossible for me to do anything for her if she's locked in the underground dungeon. If that turns out to be the case, I'll have to try and save her right before her execution.

"Ugh," he resented himself. It was at times like this he wished he had more ability. Not only was the Revent Family a family line of elite Mages, but they were also elite strategists for Adolunde.

If my older brothers were here they could probably use clairvoyance…but I guess there's no point in even thinking about what I can't do.

Ain finally came across an inn with a vacancy; apparently, there was an influx of travelers arriving to watch the execution of the Legendary Witch. Ain rested until dawn. A good night's rest cleared his mind and gave him a rush of motivation for the task ahead.

"Please wait for me, Yuki! I will not let them kill you!" he shouted to Yuki whose whereabouts were still unknown.

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THE sound of stone being cut continued from somewhere even after dawn broke. Cele had no boisterous and showy places like restaurants,

only whorehouses and taverns. Every corner of the city was in decline and desolate, wearing heavily on the hearts of anyone who dared visit.

Ain ran quietly toward the tower. All high-value criminals were held captive in the Prison Tower—that's what Luca told him the last time they were in Cele. And they actually rescued the prisoners of war Galian and Dante from the tower's dungeon. Ain believed that was certain proof Yuki must be somewhere in the tower as well.

I don't have any real plan, but at the very least I'll try bargaining with the guards. The prison's security must have been tightened with the recent prison break, but I have to try. I won't fail Yuki.

Ain ran for some distance until he came out at the base of the tower. He hid in the thicket and counted how many guards he could see out front.

I-It's not like I have any intentions of forcing my way in though! Ain thought in a panic, making excuses for no one in particular.

"…At any rate…" he mumbled.

Is it just me, or does it seem like there are even more guards than there should be?

Guards were lined in perfectly spaced intervals around the entire tower.

From the look of things, it's almost as if they are shouting Yuki is inside. The guards are probably here to hinder anyone from saving Yuki beforehand. I'm certain that's it.

Ain knew that meant there was nothing he could do for her now. Bribing was out of the question with so many guards around.

Rather than staying where I might get caught, I'm better off returning to my room and coming up with a plan to save Yuki during her execution.

"I have options now that I know Yuki's here," Ain said, slipping away from the thicket. He turned around, stopping just as he was about to step forward—someone stood in his way. From his appearance, the person standing in front of Ain was a young man close to his age. His dark hair color blended with the colors of night.

Shoot.

"Has someone been captured?" he asked.

"What?" Ain retorted.

The taller young man flashed a friendly smile as he said, "People come here occasionally. You know, like the family members of the people locked up here—wondering whether their locked up loved one is okay. Aren't you one of those people?"

What's with this person?

Ain decided to force a smile for the moment.

"What does the person you're looking for look like?"

"What?"

The young man smiled kindly. "I'll go check on them for you.

Aren't you curious how they're doing?"

Warning bells sounded in Ain's head.

Something is off about him. He's different from a soldier and different from a Knight. At the same time, he has a similar air to someone I know.

"I may not look like much, but I've got a lot of influence with the guards here."

Ain was overwhelmed by the young man's gentle yet slightly overbearing manner.

"No, thanks. It's already so late today. They might be sleeping…. Is it okay for me to ask you to do it tomorrow?"

The young man appeared surprised. "No need to hold back. What's the person you're searching for like?"

Something is off. Why is he so fixated on me and who I'm looking for?

The grinning young man walked closer to Ain.

"Could they be a woman?"

"Huh? …Ah, yeah," Ain answered with a flinch.

Uuuggggh, I want to hurry away from this place!

The young man continued without a change in his smile.

Oh no. Ain realized the source of what felt off. *His smile doesn't reach his eyes.*

Ain hated the way his eyes burrowed into him, so he averted his gaze.

"Could the person you're looking for be a shitty brat with black hair and violet eyes?"

Yuki! Ain looked at the young man wide-eyed. The young man smirked.

"I've finally found you—o' great knight of the little noble miss."

Shoot! Ain turned on his heel to run away, but it was too late—the guards from the tower already surrounded him.

"…!" One of the guards kneed Ain in the stomach. Ain buckled over.

"Relax. Not like I'm gonna drag ya off somewhere to kill ya," the young man said, grabbing Ain's hair and lifting his head off the ground. "I'm just gonna have ya watch her execution from a very special seat."

Prince Luca! Ain screamed his master's name in his mind. Ain was strung up before they dragged him inside the tower. Feelings of regret, mortification, guilt, and his utter failure whirled within him.

Chapter 38

***I** will be executed at noon today*. Yuki was at a loss on how to proceed with the reality of her execution only hours away. They only told her she would be executed, but not the method in which she would be killed.

If this were feudal Japan, it would likely be a dishonorable execution by hanging. But I'm in neither Japan nor America right now. It's suspicious whether I'm even somewhere on Earth. There's no way for me to imagine what they have planned for me in a world of Witches, Mages, and Knights. Ugh, I don't want to think about how I'm going to die!

Yuki rolled back and forth on her bed trying to think about something else. She wondered whether the day had the perfect weather for an execution. She woke up at a very early hour before the sun rose. The morning sun she saw rising over the mountains from the balcony was breathtaking.

Perfect weather for an execution? What an ominous thought, Yuki chided herself and slowly sat up. She lightly stretched and slapped her cheeks.

"Get a grip. I have to think about what I'm going to do," she encouraged herself.

In the end, the powers Kaito spoke of never manifested for her. Nor was she able to remove the shackles fastened to her feet. Moving around recklessly had injured her ankles. The abrasions on her wrists from struggling against the ropes when she had a fever were peeling scabs now. Every time she saw the scabs she was painfully reminded how much time was passing, and of the blistered white welts of the burns on her chest.

Hurry up, brain. I have to do something before that man comes. I have to make my move before Padi's brother—the boy whose name I still don't know—comes. But how?

What could Yuki do when she was no different from a bird locked in a cage with its wings cut?

Unable to sit still, she paced in circles around the room. The chain attached to her feet clanged behind her.

"…Will the best time to escape be when they're taking me to the place of my execution after all?"

Maybe someone will come to save me during that time. That faint

hope lit the darkness weighing on her heart.

Oh no…I still have hope. Is it just me trying to escape reality? Or do I really hope someone will come to save me? Thinking about it too much has made it so I don't really know the answer anymore. What do the others think of me? How much of a friendship did we develop? That's all I've been thinking about since my imprisonment.

Her thoughts drifted to Ain, Tita, Nasette, and Luca.

"…I want to see them," she sighed.

A hole had ripped open in her heart since she was separated from the others. Since that day she stopped being treated like a human, constantly exposed to hate and contempt. The warm and gentle way her friends looked at her felt nostalgic now. Just remembering their faces warmed her.

"…Yeah, I'll see them. I'll be the one to go and see them. I'll tell them I'm fine and sorry for making them worry. Plus, I have to apologize to Luca…for saying selfish things and running away after causing him problems. I wanted to be his strength yet I only got in his way."

The sound of Yuki's solemn voice mingled with the rhythmic clang of the chain and the chirping birds. She rubbed the empty space on her right hand's middle finger. She laughed at how ridiculous it was that rubbing where the ring once sat became a habit.

Yeah, I've gotta aim for the time they take me to my execution site. Yuki tried simulating what she was going to do in her mind. *The chain is fastened to the bed. There's no way for me to remove it. I'm certain the only place to unlock the shackles is on the part connected to my feet. I just have to make a run for it the moment they unlock the shackles and jump from the balcony.*

Yuki mulled over several different situations—from what she would do if there were a lot of guards, to if she fell, and a thousand other ifs and buts. As she thought about it, the more confident she was she could make a jump for it no matter the situation she faced.

"Okay, I'm good. I'm sure I can do it. No, I absolutely will do it," she encouraged herself, squeezing her hands together.

Someone roughly kicked open the door around the time Yuki glared at the fully risen sun. In strolled Padimate's younger brother.

What the heck does he want? She was oddly calm. *It's okay. I can keep this calm.*

"Time for your final meal. Eat," he said, roughly slamming the tray on the table and sitting on the chair he brought last time.

A wet cloth sat beside the food on the tray. Yuki picked it up and wiped her face. The chilled cloth felt nice against her skin. She took a deep breath, sat on the side of her bed, and pulled the tray onto her lap.

“Thanks for the food,” she said, bringing both hands together in prayer. She picked up the spoon. She thought maybe the last day would be a little bit more extravagant, but food no different than what she had received the past ten days sat on the tray.

I’m glad just to be able to eat though.

Silence filled the room as she quietly ate her meal. She felt the young man’s eyes on her, but she ate without looking at him.

Anyway, I’m surprised he came alone. I thought for sure he’d bring guards with him. Maybe someone else will come in after I finish eating.

Yuki’s body tensed. She kept glancing at the door wondering whether someone else was on the other side lying in wait. She couldn’t taste the food. Her adrenaline was pumping. She accidentally made eye contact with the young man. He was looking at her with a smirk plastered on his face.

What a nasty smile.

His smirk was oppressive and arrogant. He looked at Yuki with contempt-filled eyes that seemed to say he was in an overwhelmingly higher position in life than her. She focused on eating, paying him little attention. She brought the soup to her mouth, but quickly pulled it away because it was still too hot. A little bit spilled over on her tray. She glanced over at him, hating the fact he saw her burn her tongue. As she guessed, his eyes were locked on her.

“You’re calm,” he commented.

“…What are you talking about?”

“Nah, just thinking the little Adolunde noble girly really does believe someone will come to save her. Do you really believe in such fallacies?” His casual smile lightened the seriousness of the matter.

As if.

“As if I’d think that,” she spat and hastily shoveled food into her mouth. She wanted to quickly finish eating to stop the chatty prince from talking to her.

“You say that, but you’re actually waiting, aren’t you?”

“Shut up,” she snarled, picking up the bowl and drinking the rest of its contents to quickly end the conversation.

“You’re waiting, right? Waiting for your precious prince with indigo blue hair,” the young man exclaimed triumphantly, as though he had her pinned.

“Huh?” Yuki said dumbfounded. “Who are you talking about?”

She went to stand up, but the door to her room opened faster than she could stand. In came several soldiers followed by a tied up Ain.

“Ain!” she shouted. Her eyes met a gagged Ain’s. He must have received quite the beating; his eyes were bloodshot and they were the least damaged part of him. His face contorted in agony at the sight of

her.

How? Why? Why is Ain in a place like this?

…Isn't it obvious? He came here to save me. What other reason would he have to come?

Yuki was overcome by an intense feeling of regret and guilt. He must have been through a lot of painful experiences to be dragged here looking as he did.

It's all my fault.

Yuki went to run to Ain, but an intense wave of dizziness assaulted her the moment she stepped down from the bed.

Her head spun and her balance skewed. Every part of her brain seemed to be shutting down—the tips of her fingers and tongue were going numb. The dizziness was so extreme she had to throw herself on the ground before her mind blacked out on her. Ain's figure distorted in her blurred vision.

What's going on?

Ceaseless ringing assaulted her ears. Through the ringing she heard Ain screaming her name through his gag. Oddly enough, amid all the noise she clearly heard the young man's voice.

"It'd be a pain for us if you resisted after all. So we had you drink a drug to knock you unconscious."

His voice broke off there as all sound faded from the room. Yuki didn't hear the ringing anymore.

He got me.

Her vision gradually blurred and everything faded into darkness.

Chapter 39

EVERYTHING was spinning and swaying like when she had a fever and found it too annoying to wake up. On those days, she would always curl into a ball under her blankets. Nobuko would constantly come into her room to wake her up, each time getting more annoying. She started by pinching Yuki, smacking her, poking her, tickling her, and occasionally end by singing some made up song at the top of her lungs. Yuki was saved by her mother's cheeriness when she was sick.

Yuki tried curling into a ball now, but couldn't do it for some reason. In a daze she tried to figure out why as her ears gradually began to pick up sound.

"Kill 'er!"

Yuki's eyes snapped open at the man's shout.

What is this place?

A public square filled her line of vision as far as she could see. Ocher colored dirt was spread evenly across the entire square. A fence of gray stone separated the area Yuki was from the rest of the square. On the other side of the fence was a massive crowd of people ranging from the poor to travelers, rich merchants, and what could only be nobles with their own guards keeping the others at a distance. Some people even had chairs set up, as if they were waiting for a concert to start.

Yuki couldn't move either her hands or feet. She turned her neck —the only limb she could freely move—to see she was tied to a cross-shaped wooden pillar. A pile of wood sat at her feet, the kind best used for kindling and bonfires. The wood was piled up crosswise to burn better.

Could it be…I'm going to be burned here? Yuki's hair stood up on her arms and legs at the thought. A chill crawled down her spine and sat like a rock in the pit of her stomach. People clad from head to toe in black clothing were moving about in the middle of the square.

I'm going to be burned at the stake.

"No…" the word of denial slipped from her trembling, icy lips.

Yuki had been calm for the days leading up to this moment, but now fear consumed every fiber of her body. Her hands shook and her teeth gnashed painfully even though she wasn't cold. The execution she couldn't begin to imagine was now painfully thrust on her. A

violent sense of dread rushed through Yuki who never thought of doing anything else but running away.

"Yuki!"

The sound of her name brought Yuki to her senses. The person who called her was a slight distance away from her in the public square.

"Ain!"

"Yuki! I am so sorry! I-I—" he cried out, the gag removed from his mouth. His arms must have been tied behind his back, because Yuki couldn't see his hands. Ain's face twisted with unimaginable pain and guilt.

Yuki slowly shook her head. "No, don't be. I'm the one who's sorry."

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry, Yuki repeated over and over in her heart. *I'm sorry for causing you to be tied and beaten up. I'm sorry for being why you're forced to sit in a place like this.*

This is my punishment. Had I known it would come to this, I would have never wished for anything. I wish I had never naively hoped for someone to come save me.

Ain was covered in bruises and his clothes were ripped. Regret swelled within Yuki, knowing she was the reason he suffered.

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IN front of Yuki stood the now nostalgic seeming young man with glass marble eyes—Padimate. He was expressionlessly addressing the crowd in monotone in front of a hopelessly dazed Yuki. She saw Ain crying out of the corner of her eye. His tied hands prevented him from wiping his tears as they messily rolled down his cheeks staining his dirtied shirt.

The young man with ultramarine hair and eyes stood behind Padimate. His features were stern and serious now, despite the casual smile he flashed her just this morning.

What on Earth is going on? Yuki tried to think, but her dazed mind couldn't process anything. She wasn't sure whether her brain wouldn't work because she had given up or she was trying to escape reality by not thinking about what was going to happen.

Either way, the echoed chants of "kill her" from the crowd gnawed at her very being. Were they referring to her? The death chant came from all different corners of the crowd. Every person who uttered those words longed for her death. They desired her execution to take place. Their words slowly but surely invited death to come and take her.

"If my dying means someone else will be saved, then I'll die with

pleasure," Yuki had once said.

Would everyone in this large square staring at Yuki from the other side of the stone fence rejoice at her death? Were they worth saving?

There are so many people.

A quick glance showed even the elderly and young children were present. Did every single one of them desire her death?

"Yuki," Padimate was looking at Yuki. His eyes were as void as space and spoke nothing of what he was thinking. "Do you have something to say? Do you or don't you?"

Is he asking what my last words are before death?

"…Hey, Padi?" Padimate silently stood unmoving. "Do you think everyone here will rejoice at my death?"

How could people rejoice at someone's death?

"Will they become happy from my death?"

Can someone build happiness from someone else's death? Is that the reality of this world? Yuki didn't know.

Padimate listened to her question without a minute change in expression. After a short pause he opened his mouth, "I don't know."

"I don't know," his lifeless voice echoed in her ears.

"You don't know? Why not? Aren't you one of the people who think it's best for me to die too!"

Padimate blinked several times. His reaction startled Yuki. She knew that was the gesture Padimate made whenever he was surprised.

What? He's never thought about it before? Did Padi think it was okay for me not to die? Then why? Why didn't he save me? Why is he letting me die in front of him? Why must I die?

Anger with nowhere to go seethed inside her. The rage that had been searching for somewhere to vent itself gushed from her mouth. "Then…then why! Why won't you save me? You didn't do anything because you thought it's best if I die, right! What do you mean you don't know!"

Yuki's mind went blank. She wanted to know what this absentminded man who cared for her for days was thinking. What did he want to do? Why didn't he tell her to die as his brother had? As Orga had?

"How can you not know? …I don't care if it's a lie, so tell me everyone will become happy when I die!"

I might have been able to accept it if you did.

"What was the meaning of my coming here? What was the meaning of my life? Tell me, Padi. Answer me. Hey, answer me! Answer me now, Padi!"

I don't want this. I don't want to die. I don't want to die. I don't want to die.

“I don’t want to die! Hey, save me, Padi! *Padiii!*”

The young man with ultramarine hair led Padimate away from the square. Padimate looked over his shoulder at Yuki, then turned his back on her and departed without a second glance.

The burns on Yuki’s chest ached. She thought they didn’t hurt anymore, but they ached as if they were being rebranded into her flesh all over again. Her face contorted with the pain. A man with his head covered in a black cloth bag appeared with a torch.

No way. Don’t tell me he’s going to light the wood on fire beneath me with that.

“Don’t.” Yuki’s cry was erased by the jeering and cheering of the crowd. Yuki couldn’t tell what expression the man with his face covered in a black mask had as he held the torch that spelled her demise.

He’s smiling, Yuki thought with certainty. *Everyone—every single one of them—is smiling.*

For some reason, she could tell. Everyone present wished for her death. Everyone present longed for her death. Before long, several masked men appeared and surrounded Yuki. They each held a torch, its flame burning hot and bright.

“What are you so happy about?”

As though her words were the cue, the masked men brought their torches to the base of the kindling at the bottom of the cross she was affixed to. Flames spread across the pile of carefully crisscrossed logs.

“Eeek,” she gasped. The flames hadn’t reached her yet, but the intense heat billowed into her face. The heat from the flames was hot enough to cause burns.

Aaah, I’ve come this far without escaping.

Yuki may have been screaming half-hysterically moments ago, but an eerie calm settled over her now.

Even the jeers and calls for her death sounded differently to her. She watched the masked men leave. She saw Ain screaming something. For some reason, she could clearly see the faces of everyone in the distant crowd.

They’re smiling.

Everyone appeared to be smiling—smiling with ultimate joy and utmost satisfaction. Yuki couldn’t help it—she found herself smiling along with them. She felt that if she smiled, she could forget about everything.

Chapter 40

WIND was blowing. It started out gentle. Wafting in on the wind was a sumptuous and sweet scent. Wind was blowing. When Yuki realized it, the wind had kicked up a whirlwind of dust. Red flower petals blew in from somewhere and were dancing in the wind.

Wind was blowing. Eventually, the flames trying to consume Yuki were drawn away as the oxygen moved away with the wind. Wind blew. The wind blew as it did in the Japanese legend of the three weasels that were said to blow in with a supernatural whirlwind. The wind coiled and wrapped through the air, shaking the trees. Red flower petals danced through the air.

A woman stood in front of Yuki. She appeared to be in her mid-twenties. Her short hair—that appeared either gray or black depending on how you looked at it—fluttered in the wind.

With a smile she said, “You’ve got guts to smile in a situation like this.”

None of Yuki’s five senses seemed to work. She couldn’t hear the crackling sound of the wood under the fire below her or feel the searing heat of the flames whipping at her legs. Only the sound of the woman’s voice perfectly reached her.

“I came to take a peek when I heard they caught my impostor, to find they actually found a violet child. They worked hard to make this one work,” the woman grumbled, folding her arms. She closely examined Yuki. Her face contorted just as she spotted the burns on Yuki’s chest.

“They sure were elaborate about it. They even went as far as a Licorice…calling that a flower bud is disgusting and repulsive.”

Yuki thought it looked like the woman shrunk a little. No, she was undoubtedly shrinking.

“Adolunde’s snot-nosed mamma’s boy has sickeningly bad taste.”

Rather than a woman, the little girl who now appeared to be in her early teens smiled sweetly when she made eye contact with Yuki.

“Poor thing. You had such a thing forced on you. It must’ve hurt,” the girl said compassionately. Yuki noticed she was now the same size and physique as her.

“Who are you?” Yuki asked.

The girl with boy’s length hair grinned, “The real thing.” The girl’s violet eyes gleamed in the light.

By the real thing, she means she’s the real Legendary Witch?

“It happened a lot in the past too. Rumors they’ve caught my impostor. Well, there hasn’t been too much of that lately. They used to cast illusions on tempted Witches, so they appeared to have violet eyes or would brainwash people.” The girl peered intently at Yuki. “But you’re the real deal, huh?”

Eh? Huh? Whaat?

The girl continued talking, ignoring Yuki’s confusion. “Well, I don’t really care whether you’re an impostor or the real thing. I’ll save you.”

“…Huh?” Yuki didn’t know how to respond to this woman who suddenly appeared, shrunk into a girl, and immediately offered to save her. “Why would you? When nobody else would?”

There’s no reason for her to save me. If anything, she should be angry I impersonated her.

“Why, you ask? You ask interesting questions, girl. You don’t want to be saved? Even in this situation? You were crying and shouting so much for someone to save you earlier.”

“That’s true, but…” Yuki fumbled for words. She glanced down and saw the flames were locked in place, like a wave of flame frozen

in time.

Oh yeah, it's not hot.

The flames denied the very passage of time, stuck where they had been when the wind blew through. Yuki looked at the girl.

"Oh yeah," the girl laughed. "I wouldn't be able to chat with you if I hadn't done that. I'm the one who'd be troubled by them claiming the Legendary Witch died. At the very least, I wish they'd talk about it after I've really died."

The girl sighed and shrugged. "Anyhow, to answer your question, I am helping you because I can. I don't want to deal with the problems my death will bring, so I'll just get you down from there and randomly drop you off somewhere. You cool with that?"

Suddenly being asked if she were cool with being saved that way didn't register in Yuki's mind.

What the heck is even going on right now? How is this happening? I don't get it. She wanted to hold her head, but her hands were still tied behind her.

"Okay?" the girl asked to make sure. She sighed during Yuki's long pause to find an answer. "Aaaah, sheesh. Do you want to live? Do you want to die? Which is it!"

Those words brought back the terrible situation Yuki was in. The intense heat billowing up at her feet, the rampant bloodlust from the jeering crowd. The insanity of it all. Lifeless eyes. The chants calling for her death.

"I don't want to die!"

The girl grinned, "***Good job***." Her words came out distorted.

The girl snapped her fingers.

***

THE next thing Yuki knew, all her senses returned. Her feet and legs were being burned by the rising heat. She could hear the jeering and clamoring of the crowd seeking a better look. She felt their bloodlust as their eyes burrowed into her. The only difference from before was the sweet scent of flowers and the young girl standing between Ain and Yuki.

The girl smirked and cackled in a high-pitched voice. Her voiced boomed through the area. Whether people were silenced by her mere presence or a more sinister method, silence reigned.

"Are you watching? O' Prince of Maruk and quack prince," she sneered, waving her hand in a specific direction. Countless rose vines erupted from the ground at her feet and jutted toward Yuki. Before long, the vines put out the blaze at Yuki's feet and grew longer and longer.

“What bad boys you are. I’ll punish you for mistaking me.”

Wind kicked up.

“What is this?” Yuki was flustered by the vines suddenly wrapping around her.

“Yuki!” Ain’s voice echoed.

“Ain!” Yuki cried back.

The girl glanced at Ain. “Oh dear. Are you her friend?”

“What are you doing with Yuki!” Ain shouted.

“Do you want to save her?”

“Of course I do!”

“Then I’ll save you. You’re captured too. Nice going with that, utterly failing to rescue the damsel and all. Although I feel as if I’ve seen your ugly mug somewhere before,” the girl grinned and clapped her hands in front of his eyes. Ain slowly fell over like a puppet after its strings were cut.

“Ain!” Yuki screamed.

The girl waved her hands in dismissal and casually said, “No need to worry. I won’t do anything bad to you two.”

The girl glared into the distance again. “I don’t know what Adolunde’s sniveling brat who still sucks at his mother’s teat said to you, but you’d better fix that sister complex of yours too—or else the world will crumble around you.”

Rose vines wrapped around Yuki’s entire body. Wind ripped through the gathered people, sending them screaming. Bright-red flower petals danced in the wind. Yuki’s vision was obscured in the embrace of vines.

Chapter 41

HOW *many times have I woken up in a strange place like this? I must really lack a sense of danger*. Yuki thought of all the times she woke up in a new and unfamiliar location after having passed out or been knocked out.

"You up?"

Yuki slowly sat up and glanced around the room with a cutely designed bed, elegantly designed table, and a marvelously soft sofa. Yuki was lying on the sofa.

"I'm awake…" Yuki replied through the haze of a good rest. In the corner of the room was a door leading to another room. Something smelled of ginger, flour, and cinnamon.

Why do I always lack common sense in these situations? Yuki thought ashamed of her gurgling stomach. A girl came into the room with a tray weighed down with a variety of breads, soup, and fruits as Yuki rubbed her hungry stomach.

"Here you go! Sorry for the wait!" the girl said, placing the tray on the table. She skillfully poured water from a pitcher into a glass and sat in a chair at the table.

"Come on. What are you doing? Hurry up and eat," she urged Yuki who was staring at her in blank amazement.

"Huh? Ah, okay…" Yuki didn't understand the sudden shift in her life's circumstances, but she sat in the chair opposite of the girl. The girl was already eating her share.

"Thank you for the food…" Yuki said, timidly picking up her spoon and digging into the soup, relishing the pleasure of another meal. The food made by the Legendary Witch was delicious.

Yuki just hoped the house wasn't made of candy, and Ain wasn't stuffed into the stove. Knowing her luck, it would be just like this crazy world to force a fairytale on her.

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NOW *that I think about it, no one told me the Legendary Witch's name*, Yuki mused as she drank her after dinner tea.

"It's obvious no one would know. I've lived my life with the title

Legendary Witch," the girl laughed when Yuki brought it up.

"Vizui Vil Dividum. You can call me Vivi."

"Viz…? Vivi it is then," Yuki said, giving up on pronouncing her full name.

Why does everyone in this world have such complicated names? Yuki wondered as she mentally repeated the name.

"What's your name?"

"Yuki Kasuga. Call me Yuki."

"Yuki it is," Vivi smiled. "So why did you impersonate me?"

"Aah, about that…"

Vivi held her stomach as she buckled over laughing, hitting the table with her right hand at Yuki's explanation over what happened at Fol Castle. "Ah, that persistent fox, huh! Heh! You did that to him, eh? Ahahaha!"

"He hasn't turned completely into a fox though," Yuki commented.

"Perhaps I'll pay him another visit," Vivi said in all seriousness.

After Vivi finished her bout of laughter, Yuki straightened up in her chair and bowed her head. "Um, thank you very much for saving me."

"Oh my, you're very welcome," Vivi said as if she were surprised to be thanked.

"So…there's something I would like to ask you," Yuki timidly brought up.

"What is it?" Vivi asked, not breaking eye contact with Yuki as the kettle drifted into the room to pour another cup of tea.

"Um, I was wondering what happened to my friend Ain."

"Aaah, you mean the Mage boy? I tossed him somewhere within Adolunde's territory. Oh, but I didn't literally toss him there. I gently plopped him down on the ground. I'd say he's probably wandered home by now?"

Isn't plopping him down and tossing him there the same thing?

"I see," is all Yuki said, deciding she would be better off not making that remark.

Vivi abruptly started sulking. "I made such an over exaggerated appearance and yet Yuki—or should I say I—was still declared dead at the execution," she huffed and gulped down her full cup of hot tea after two cubes of sugar climbed into the cup.

"Seriously? You were so showy and flashy when you—"

"Right! That's why I did such a spectacular rescue for those idiot princes! I'm sure Maruk brought out one of their indentured Witches and cast an illusion to force their point across. Bah, I get no respect."

"Indentured Witches?" Yuki repeated the unfamiliar word.

"Oh, right. Normal people don't know about this. Yuki, have you

heard about how there was once a Witch Hunt?"

I don't count as a normal person in this world though, Yuki thought, but quietly nodded. "Yeah, I heard a little about it."

"I see," Vivi lowered her voice, "You see, there was once a large-scale Witch Hunt. I believe it was about ten years ago. Around the time Rvydom fell. Witches who were captured at the time were given an ultimatum, 'Will you die or swear your allegiance to this country?'"

"I didn't…know about that," Yuki responded, surprised at the new information.

"All the weak Witches were slaughtered and all the Witches who had lived a long time died with their pride. Those who surrendered themselves to their capturers were occasionally used as playthings, occasionally had their powers misused and abused, and all were killed once they were worn down to the point of uselessness.

"And then once the Witch population was greatly diminished, the various countries realized their importance and their abuse mostly abated. Officially, they persecute and slander Witches as vile villains, when in reality the governments are sheltering them away as national treasures. The funny thing is, there's no country any Witch would truly pledge their loyalty to," Vivi explained.

"But why are Witches persecuted? I don't see Witches as being all too evil. What exactly did Witches do to receive such horrible persecution?" Yuki asked.

Vivi was taken aback for a moment before she burst out laughing. "Hehe. AHAHAHA! You're weird! Do you seriously understand what you are saying? Ahaha!"

Yuki glared at Vivi for laughing at her for defending Witches.

"Listen well and remember this, Yuki—Witches are fundamentally evil."

"Why? You saved me, Vivi." Yuki said.

Vivi snickered. "That was merely the whim of an old Witch. There is a reason why people do not proclaim they're the Legendary Witch anymore. But you know, Yuki, if I were really nice, I would have dropped the Mage boy off at his home. You see, Witches are women," Vivi said with a licentious cackle.

The bewitching laugh unfitting to her current physique hinted even more so at a far older mentality with an experienced charm.

"Witches are blessed with amazing looks; they can dress up to be the most beautiful of women and change their appearances to whatever they want them to be. Once they have the beauty they want, they of course want to capture themselves a good man of high stature and breeding. Once they've picked a target, they won't be satisfied until he falls into their grasp. They want men to serve them. Witches care nothing for the morals of others. They target boyfriends, fiancés,

husbands, fathers, and even kings.

"Witches frankly follow their desire to be pampered and fussed over, uncaring of the suffering of others that comes as a result. That's why they don't care whether the man is spoken for or not. They'll do anything to get what they want—they'll make love potions and change themselves to fit the preferences of their prey. Then once they win their target, they wear him down to the bone, get tired of him, and toss him aside like a used tissue. Rarely does a man prove worthy of a Witch's true love.

"But what about human women? Their families? They quickly grow old. And even if there's a beautiful woman—her beauty is fleeting. Do you think those women can rival or compete with Witches who can shift their beauty like a pair of clothes? Thus, the human women become enraged. They seek to kill us or the men or both," Vivi explained as if it were no big deal. Yuki's eyes rounded in shock.

"Well, that in and of itself isn't too bad," Vivi said, suddenly flashing a smile suitable to her ten-year-old appearance. "Now here's where the real problem starts. What do you think happens when the man the Witch is after is a king, a prince, or of a high position?"

Yuki hesitated over how to answer the question suddenly directed toward her.

Uuh, let's see, Witches like men and human women can't win against Witches. And so if the man the Witch was after was a prince—

"I know! They won't be able to have children!" Yuki answered.

Ain once told Yuki Witches have a hard time conceiving children. Yuki looked confidently at Vivi who said, "Boo, wrong," with a complacent smile.

"Why am I wrong?" Yuki asked.

"Yuki, do you understand that princes and kings typically have counterparts of equal standing waiting to become queens? It's general knowledge the queen's kid will become the next king."

"Heh…I see," Yuki mumbled trying to follow Vivi's logic.

"And that's where the problem comes in. Say there's no longer a king on the throne and the heir to the throne is enthralled with a Witch—there won't be an official queen. Obviously, right?" Vivi smirked happily.

Yuki was a little frightened about where Vivi's absolute confidence over the lack of an official queen came from.

"The official wife is always a daughter of a good, high-ranking family. If they aren't going to be the official wife they become a concubine and are raised only to pander after the king's favor. Yet if they don't receive his favor there's no reason for their existence. Noble daughters are prideful creatures, so they scheme—scheme to kill the Witches."

“Wh-Why do they immediately jump to the conclusion to kill the Witch?” Yuki asked.

“Who knows? Maybe they just want to eliminate the competition? Competition can be a pain. I’m a Witch though, so I don’t know,” Vivi cackled. “Just so you know, humans aren’t the only ones at fault here. Witches in turn curse humans.”

“Huh? What? I didn’t catch the last part,” Yuki said and was laughed at.

“It’s nothing? Well, there was a case where a country’s princes fought over one Witch and it broke out into a war, so Witches are dangerous. But it’s also a fact that a country can’t prosper without a Witch’s power. Hence why they can’t completely annihilate Witches. Some civilizations and cultures only exist thanks to Witches after all. And let’s not forget the threat of one side having Witches while the other does not.”

“H-Heh, is that so?”

“It is. Even the Knight System…” Vivi stopped and took a long hard look at Yuki. “Oh my, you’re bonded to a Knight.”

“What?” Yuki examined herself. She didn’t see anything different from other people. “You can tell?”

Yuki no longer had the proof of their contract—the ring—on her. She unconsciously rubbed her right hand’s middle finger.

“I can tell. A Knight and their Master are connected. But you normally can’t see it, so the ring was created as visible proof of the bonding for humans.”

“Hmm. I see,” Yuki nodded, “it makes sense to want a visible sign of the contract.” Vivi grinned at her.

“You’re quite young, but you go, girl!” Vivi laughed and smiled like she was just let in on a juicy story. “Oh ho ho, what’s this? Is he cool? Handsome? C’mon, tell me!”

“Cool and handsome?” Yuki repeated and thought of Luca. He was tall, had a chiseled and handsome face, and deep ocean blue eyes. He was an impeccable specimen of a man. “S-Shut it! It has nothing to do with you, Vivi!”

“Aaww. Hey, you don’t have to be so mean about it,” Vivi pouted.

Yuki didn’t want to tell Vivi about Luca for some reason.

Chapter 42

"WITCHES don't age," Vivi mentioned during their conversation earlier. A part of Yuki thought she might actually be a Witch when she heard. She hesitated over whether to ask Vivi—a real Witch and one extolled as the Legendary Witch—about it.

Yuki learned from Vivi that the house she woke up in was Vivi's *current* dwelling—a normal house in the woods by all appearances. Yuki set foot outside to see the house was surrounded by a dense forest thick with vines and foliage. She came across a small waterfall and a spring after following one of the oddly made paths into the forest.

Yuki woke up in the early hours of the morning and quickly rushed off to explore the outside before Vivi could nag her any further about her Knight. Yuki slipped off her shoes and plopped her feet into the cool spring water, which felt nice against her singed skin. She occasionally kicked her feet around in the water as she stared absently at the sparkling water's surface.

I might actually be a real Witch. A piece of me feels that maybe there's a chance people from Earth who come to this world are Witches. I mean Papa did mention something about me having powers. Are they not the same powers as the Witches'?

They say Witches have a seal somewhere on their body, but it's possible mine hasn't shown up yet because my powers haven't manifested…. What if I really am a Witch? I can't fathom what it will be like, but would it mean I have to continue living many more years stuck at this age?

Yuki sighed and sighed again as she thought about the future, all the while kicking her feet in the cool water.

***

THE Legendary Witch—Vivi's title alone had Yuki naturally imagining her as a scary and difficult to approach person. But contrary to her expectations, Vivi took good care of Yuki and talked to her about all sorts of things. She seemed to love chatting while sipping tea and was in possession of an assortment of teas.

Yuki was reminded Vivi really was a Witch whenever she occasionally said something utterly foreign to Yuki's way of thinking. Occasional bouts of magic were visible around the house too, like the broom that swept on its own or the always full bucket of fresh cold water. There was more weight to Vivi's words because she had lived for such a long time. Vivi was in essence an elder, even if she looked like a child.

They finished lunch and were sitting down to tea when Vivi suddenly asked, "So? What are you going to do, Yuki?"

"Do about?"

"You're not going to stay here forever, right? What are you going to do after you're done recovering here?"

"Uh, well, I need to get back to Adolunde for now…I'm sure everyone is worried about me."

Besides, I need to apologize.

Vivi had a dubious look on her face. "How is a child such as you going to get all the way to Adolunde?"

A child? Vivi looks like a child too.

A smoky fragrance wafted from the billowing steam of the strong black tea. Yuki found the tea Vivi brewed very delicious.

Yuki picked up her cup and pursed her lips as she said, "I may look like this, but I'm actually eighteen."

"Huuuuuh?" Vivi gasped, looking at Yuki in astonishment and spilling the hot tea from her cup. At the same time a crab-shaped cloth walked its way over to clean the spill.

Vivi took a long hard look at Yuki from head to toe, eventually saying, "Aaah, I get it now. You've stopped aging."

Yuki nodded, surprised at how quickly Vivi affirmed and accepted the fact.

"…Hey, Vivi?" Vivi glanced at Yuki as she brought the cup to her lips. "I think I might actually be a Witch."

Vivi spat out her mouthful of tea. Yuki had the bad luck of sitting directly opposite of her and was grandly covered in the tea.

"Hot! What was that for?"

Vivi coughed painfully like some of the tea went down the wrong pipe.

"Are you okay, Vivi?"

Yuki peered at Vivi's face. Vivi stared back at her as if she were looking at something unbelievable. "You…REALLY don't know a thing, do you?"

Vivi wiped Yuki's face with a nearby cloth placemat as she said, "You're not a Witch—that is beyond a doubt the truth."

"Really? But I've stopped aging and might have a seal somewhere __"

"You don't. I know," Vivi responded stiffly. "You don't have a flower."

"Well, excuse me for not having flower-like beauty! I mean I realize I don't have a pretty face, but—"

"Not that kind of flower. They also call it a Flower Seal, but I mean a Witch's Seal. Other Witches can tell if you have one unless you're intentionally hiding it… I mean, Yuki, do you even know what makes a Witch stop aging?"

"Huh? I don't."

Vivi shrugged her shoulders in exasperation. "Every Witch is born with a flower bud seal somewhere on their body. When the bud blooms into a flower they stop aging."

"Heh, I see. So, what do they do to make the bud bloom into a flower and stop aging?"

"They do it with a man."

"Do it? Do what?" Yuki asked. Vivi smiled suggestively. Yuki felt her cheeks turn red.

Hey! You mean that kind of doing it! Yuki thought, but didn't dare confirm aloud what she already guessed. Her thoughts then switched to the juicy gossip kind, *which would mean Vivi did it at a very young age.*

"Hence why there are no Witches without a seal. They have the seal from birth. This is why those idiot princes had to burn one onto you to make you appear like the real thing. Understand? Plus, Yuki, it's not that you can't age, but that you've stopped *aging*," Vivi said confidently, furthering Yuki's confusion.

"How can you be so sure?"

Yuki didn't recall ever telling Vivi about the fact her hair and nails stopped growing.

Vivi suddenly smiled. "I've got a strong-red tinge, but you've got a strong bluish tinge."

Yuki was about to ask her what was tinged different colors when she realized it—the violet color of their eyes.

"Hey, Yuki, do you know why violet colored eyes are rare in this world?" Vivi abruptly asked.

"Why?" Yuki thought they were rare because they were merely a recessive gene. "Because they are a recessive gene?"

"Re…cess…ive gene? What's that? I don't know it. Does it go good with tea? Okay, let's put it another way. Have you heard about how the people from Rvydom have special powers?"

"Ah, yeah. I've heard about that." Yuki learned about it from Ain.

"Good. The special powers of Rvydom's people allow them to make barren soil fertile again, develop new medicines, and so on. So then, what about the person who rules over all those people with

special powers?"

Yuki looked at Vivi as if it just hit her.

"Understand now?" Vivi grinned. "You possess a special and curious power too. Violet eyes are a sign one possesses a very strong power."

Is she referring to the same powers Papa mentioned?

"But I…don't have any powers," Yuki confided. She believed something would change when she came to this world, but nothing did.

"Your power took on a specialization. It stopped when it realized it was taking too much of a toll on you mentally and physically."

Yuki didn't understand. *Basically, she's saying my body couldn't keep up with my developing powers so it stopped growing?*

"Does that mean…I can become my actual age?"

"You can," Vivi immediately answered the question Yuki had been tormented by for the past eight years of her life. Shock and joy put her in high spirits.

"Really? When?" she asked, ecstatic.

"Someday. Someday that may or may not come." Vivi's answer trampled over Yuki's brief moment of joy.

"…Vivi, you can't age me?"

"I can't. Not something that alters you in a way that would be safe."

"But you turned Isis into a fox."

"That was an illusion. I just made it look like he had fox ears to those who saw him and when he saw himself. He actually has normal human ears. Healing powers do affect and alter one's body, but your problem isn't a health issue."

Too much information bombarded her at once to make any use of it.

"What should I do then?" Yuki asked.

"You're asking me? Decide for yourself. I'm not your mommy after all," Vivi said taken aback by her question.

Chapter 43

YUKI always wanted to grow out her hair. She wanted to try cutting it super short too, but with no chance of her hair ever growing out, she found herself unwilling to cut it any shorter than shoulder length. She also thought it would be great to be just a little taller. How awesome would it be to wear high heels and look like other girls her age?

More. More. More. She wanted more height, more hair, more of everything she couldn't have the past eight years. Her list of wishes was inexhaustible. Having everything you want suddenly given to you tends to have the reverse effect of making you lose sight of what it is you really wanted—Yuki was in exactly that kind of predicament.

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IT all started when Yuki declared she was going to go to Adolunde.

I have to hurry there. I have to see everyone. I'm certain they're bothered I suddenly up and disappeared, Yuki fretted.

"Isn't it fine if you don't go?" Vivi pointed out as Yuki worried about how to get there.

"No, it's not. I need to apologize," Yuki answered her.

"Hmm, I see. But you'll stick out like a sore thumb, you know? How many ten-year-old girls with violet eyes do you think travel alone?"

"…I know. But I have to go anyway. Hmm, what should I do?" Yuki pondered aloud. Vivi laughed from where she sipped her tea across from Yuki. A knife cut vegetables and meat into perfect slices, while a pot began to boil, all without a single glance from Vivi. "… What?"

"Oh dear, little Vivi has gone and thought up a wonderful plan," Vivi cooed.

Did she just refer to herself in the third person?

"More than thinking about the horrors of traveling alone through a war-torn land, your focus is on wanting to properly apologize to your friends. You can't help being beside yourself with worry for them. Right? What a courageous and praiseworthy goal.

"So I'll pitch in and help out the courageous and adorable little

Yuki." Vivi said the last part in such a sickeningly sweet voice, Yuki felt as if hearts or maybe little cherubim might spew magically from her mouth.

Vivi leaned in close to Yuki, "You're so gallant, I want to be both kind and mean to you."

"What!"

Vivi snapped her fingers. Rose vines burst up from the ground at Yuki's feet and coiled around her. Yuki's view was buried in bright-red rose petals.

“Stop it. Hey, what is this!” Yuki gasped. Once the petals fell to the ground, Vivi appeared shorter.

Her hair extended all the way down her back. The clothing she borrowed from Vivi also expanded to fit her current size. Vivi was looking up at Yuki.

“How is it?” she asked with a satisfied smile.

“How is what?”

“Nah, well, I tried adjusting your age to one that would be okay for you to travel alone. I’d say you’re about sixteen now? Your actual age is eighteen, right? I wanted you to notice when you aged for real, so I went with sixteen. Want to take a look?” Vivi asked, snapping her fingers. The closet door sprang open. A full-length mirror waddled out to stand in front of her.

Yuki examined herself in the mirror. Her face matured, her black hair reached the center of her back, her legs and arms were long, and —

“My eyes are black.”

The irises of her eyes were black.

“Yup. One wrong step with violet eyes and you’ll get sold off somewhere.”

“Is this an illusion too?”

“Nope. I mixed conjuration, some growth, a touch of age, and a rainbow with things from your original body and put it in your drink earlier. Your eye color is an illusion though. But I’ve at least made it so other Witches can’t tell when they look at you, so you’ll be fine!”

“…Thanks, Vivi. You’re the most wonderful Witch of them all.”

Happiness welled-up within Yuki. She couldn’t figure out why Vivi was so nice to her despite all her teasing. Yuki fixed her eyes on her reflection in the mirror. How many times had she imagined what she would look like older?

She was dejected every time she woke up and realized she had only dreamed about being older—in reality, nothing changed. What Vivi did almost made it worth everything that happened to her after years of being out of place. Yuki finally looked closer to her age.

Black eyes. They’re the same color as everyone else in Japan.

Yuki stroked her cheeks, feeling the soft skin.

Suddenly, a serious voice broke the silence. “Yes…I’ve made it so no one can tell if they look at you. That’s why, even if your friends look at you, they won’t know it’s you, Yuki.”

“What?” Yuki glanced over her shoulder—Vivi stood there with a coldhearted smirk. “Vivi?”

“…I’m not kind at all.” Yuki was bewildered by Vivi’s mischievous smile—she appeared like a completely different person. “When you’ve lived for too long, you get bored.”

There was something frightening about her overly sweet smile. Yuki couldn't pinpoint what it was exactly. Vivi was definitely smiling—and that's why it was scary. She wasn't like Orga whose smile only reached his lips as hatred filled his eyes. No, Vivi was enjoying this from the deepest depths of her being.

"I'm bored, so I sow seeds all over the place. Seeds that'll bloom into something fun."

"Seeds…"

"Yes, seeds. I'll help and save people, and do anything required if it looks like it'll turn into something entertaining. So, won't you please entertain me?" Chills raced down Yuki's spine at Vivi's composed smile. "Why don't we play a game? It's a simple game, really. You just have to return to your normal form. That's it—then it's your win."

"H-Huuuh?"

"If you don't take back your form, you'll be stuck this way for life. Oh, and being considerate of you losing, I've made it so this form will age as a normal human. Let's see, what should we make the charm for turning you back?" Vivi mused, cutely putting her index finger to her lip.

Her face lit up as if she thought of something good. "You're stuck this way until you make eye contact with your Knight! Isn't that simple?"

"Hang on a minute. Wait, Vivi! Regardless of what you've done for me, you're being too self-serving with all this!"

"…Self-serving?" Vivi repeated, staring blankly at Yuki for a moment before her lips curled into the most innocent smile. "You should have learned by now that everyone is self-serving. Or have you failed to take the lessons of this world to heart, Yuki? Learn just how your unduly good-natured devotion and dedication to your friends appears to them. Learn just how shallow and ambiguous the relationships between people are."

Vivi strutted over to Yuki and stood up on her tippy-toes to pat her on the head. "And then show me. Show me the bond between Knight and Master. I'll give you everything and anything you need," Vivi said, loneliness encroaching her voice. She stepped away from Yuki and swiftly went into the other room.

Did something happen? Did I say something wrong?

Yuki's heart ached when she thought she might be the one causing the painful expressions that occasionally flashed across Vivi's face.

Learn the hard way, huh? For some reason Yuki didn't hate what Vivi was doing to her. *How long has she been alive for?*

"I've forgotten," was Vivi's response when Yuki asked her.

Either way, it was clearly an incomprehensibly long time. Yuki

couldn't imagine it.

The bond between Knight and Master, huh? Do Luca and I even have that kind of bond?

***

VIVI'S house was located in Rvydom.

Just when Yuki finished drinking her morning tea, Vivi said, "Now that you've made up your mind, hop to it!" and brought out a jute bag Yuki wasn't sure could even pass for a bag.

Vivi gave her a change of clothes, spending expenses, and handed her a map. Another larger map floated out from a back room and spread itself across the table, where four needles drifted upward and skewered its corners into the table.

"Listen well, okay? We're currently located in the dead center of Rvydom. And if you head down to the southwest there's a mountain range. If I'm not mistaken this mountain over here is the smallest," Vivi explained, drawing a circle around the smaller mountain with a pen.

"You've gotta go even farther south after descending the mountain. The city that comes just before the ocean is Adolunde's Royal Capital. It's pretty far," she commented nonchalantly.

Yuki repeated every word she said in her head, so as not to forget. "…Okay, I think I've got it."

First things first, I need to get over the mountain to the south.

"Thank you, Vivi. You went out of your way to tell me the way and even gave me money," Yuki smiled at Vivi. Vivi looked shocked. "…Hm? What's wrong?"

Vivi heaved a heavy and visible sigh at Yuki's further questioning. "Do you normally thank Witches who one-sidedly force a life-altering game on you? Or what? Are you just an idiot?"

"I-Idiot—I'm not an idiot! I think you're more of a good-natured person than I am, Vivi. You rescued me and then you're giving me all this stuff. Is it really okay for me to take it? Maybe it's best for me to give it back after all?"

"I don't need it! Good heavens, I'm fine, thank you. I'm just an over-fond and doting parent."

…An over-fond and doting parent? Whose?

Vivi smiled and changed topics before Yuki could ask, "All of the children in this world are my children! Now, off with you! Shoo, shoo!" Vivi waved her hand in a shooing motion to get her out of the house. Two brooms behind her made the same motion at Yuki, as if she were dirt needing to be swept away.

"Ahaha. Okay, I'm off then." Yuki took several steps to the door

and turned around. “Vivi, to be honest with you, I don’t know what the bond between a Knight and Master is. So I’m not sure whether it’s something I can show you. But if I do end up meeting my Knight Luca, come and see me, will you?”

“…Why?”

Yuki mulled over the answer for a bit before answering, “Because I think you’ll learn just how cool Luca is that way?”

A few seconds passed with Vivi’s mouth hanging wide-open before she burst out laughing. “Why did you make it sound like a question? …Sure, if you take back your own form.”

“Thank you.”

Reassured by Vivi’s smile, Yuki opened the door to the morning’s sun. She stepped outside and shut the door behind her. She looked back and saw the house steadily fade away without a trace. And thus, Yuki’s journey to find her Violet Knight and regain her true age began.

***

VIVI snapped her fingers the moment the door shut—now Yuki wouldn’t be able to tell where the house was anymore. Vivi’s smile faded and she sighed as she put her face on the table.

“Kind, huh?”

I haven’t heard that word in a long time, she thought and closed her eyes. She felt as if she could see Yuki’s beaming smile on the other side of her eyelids.

“I think I was pretty mean though,” she muttered.

Despite all the nasty and sarcastic things she said, Yuki thanked her with a smile. Vivi felt wretched in a place deep inside that she had long since thought lost. She rubbed her forehead into the cool wooden surface of the table.

“I really am mean…I didn’t tell you anything after all.”

But Vivi had decided from the start not to tell Yuki anything, so she didn’t regret her choice. Yuki’s pure and simple-minded smile still seemed to fill the house. Vivi sighed. She leaned against her chair and hunched her back. If anyone had been there to watch, they would have seen the true entity known as the Legendary Witch.

“May Aridol’s divine protection be with Yuki,” Vivi whispered as an epitaph to this crumbling world.

***

KAITO had been depressed lately. Ever since Yuki left for the other world, he was depressed and dejected, regretfully muttering things

like, “I should have told her about that.”

“I should have let her go sooner.”

He was smoking a cigarette on the balcony looking up at the night sky again tonight.

“Kai, you’ll catch a cold if you stay out in the cool night breeze,” Nobuko warned him.

“Yeah…” he replied halfheartedly, his attention elsewhere. “I wonder if Yuki’s all right.”

“She’s fine.”

How many times had they repeated this conversation? Every time Kaito appeared to accept Yuki was fine, but obviously there was no way he had accepted it internally.

There’s no way of really knowing, so saying she’s okay only offers a momentary peace of mind for something we don’t know for sure, Nobuko thought.

The first time she met Kaito he was terribly confused. He was on edge, like a cat with its fur puffed to look bigger. Nobuko remembered how he slept with a kitchen knife clutched in his hands every night. She found it suspicious at the time, but now it was an endearing memory.

I’m the only one who doesn’t know of that world. Both Yuki and Kaito know that world now. Nobuko secretly wanted to visit the world her two most precious people had such a strong connection to.

“I wonder whether she’s okay,” Kaito muttered.

Nobuko smiled at Kaito’s forlorn figure and went out onto the balcony with him. She stood beside Kaito and stared at the sky. “She might not be okay.”

Kaito looked over at her. “Why must you say something so mean, Nobuko?” he asked her dejectedly with the eyes of an abandoned puppy.

Kaito was dreadfully worried about his beloved daughter. Nobuko found that side of him precious.

“Even if she’s in a situation where she’s not okay, our Yuki will do something about it.”

Nobuko always prayed to the stars that her beloved Kaito would be healthy and that their beloved child would remain safe.

Afterword

HELLO, I'm Yohna. It's a pleasure to meet you. I recently got married and took on the last name JIN. You write it with the kanji for *kami*, which means GOD. Cross Infinite World asked me to publish with them before I got married, so maybe I should have made my penname GOD Yohna. Just kidding!

Thank you very much for picking up a copy of *The Violet Knight*. I wrote this series with Japanese young women in mind, so I'm really worried whether people in the English-speaking community will enjoy it or not. I hope you enjoyed the first volume! I know this isn't a super cutesy or overly happy story, so I'm full of gratitude toward everyone who took the time to read it.

This story has an interesting origin. This may just apply to Japan, but there are some people who have a job at a company but no work to do. Eight years ago that was me for two straight years.

I was aware of my own lack of knowledge, so I surfed through Wikipedia and read all about Persian Mythology and Romanian vampires. But I eventually got sick of doing that and figured it didn't matter what I did as long as I faced the computer at my work desk, so I started writing *The Violet Knight*. At the time I was somewhere between Yuki and Luca's age.

From there I eventually resigned to recuperate from an illness until today. I have continued to write the story over the past eight years whenever I could find a little time. I'm shocked to think about how a story I wrote completely as a hobby and as an escape from reality is going to be accessible by the whole world! I'm not even sure how many people that makes it available to compared to the 130 million people who speak Japanese.

When I looked it up on Google it said the world population is 7.4 billion! That's more than fifteen times the amount of people I could reach with just Japanese! Just thinking that even a portion of that population is interested in novels for young women is like a dream come true! It fills me with happiness! Is this what they mean by the American Dream? If I can share my blessings at all, I know Japan's

birthrate is pretty terrible right now, so I want to give birth to enough kids to fill a baseball team!

Translating a Japanese novel into English is pretty hard. In my personal opinion, I created the original rough draft, Miss Messier is the author, and the readers are the ones who get to decide what's good and bad about the work.

I used to be an actress. I will never forget the words of my former teacher at the time. They were, "The moment you put your work into the world it is no longer your work."

I sent out *The Violet Knight*. As such, it is a work that has already left my hands. Even so, Miss Messier of the Cross Infinite World team complimented my work and recommended it for publication, so it's thanks to her I got this far. What I originally wrote may not have been interesting, but I am certain Miss Messier made it easy to understand and a fun read.

By the way, which character do you like? I love Ain so much I can't take it. I created a Twitter Bot. If you could tweet me which characters you like it would mean the world to me as an author. The Twitter Account is @god_yohna.

This is the last thing I'm writing about in this afterword, but *The Violet Knight* Light Novel series is a revised version of the Web Novel I have on my website. I did my best to make sure overseas fans can enjoy a revised version of my work, so please feel free to use the Web Novel version as comparison to study Japanese!

With much love to everyone who took the time to read this,
8/1/2016

陽菜

yohna

Cross Infinite World Works

Light Novels

My Favorite Song ~The Silver Siren~

By Kairi Aragusuku

In the land of Reveur there exists a legend of the Silver Siren—a monstrous being who with words alone can topple entire civilizations. People have long learned the legend, to fear those with silver hair, and to flee from those who dare mutter the words of Song!

Meet Kanon, a shy everyday high school student preparing for her graduation day with a final tour of her school. Singing a mysterious sheet music she found in the school music room sends her to a fantastic alternate world of adventure, cursed Sorcerers, war-torn lands, monsters, and skilled mercenaries. But she soon learns that in this strange new world of magic and swordplay, she is perhaps the greatest threat of all. Will Kanon survive in this fantasy world where people view her as a nightmare made reality? Let the Song begin, for nothing else will save her…!

My Favorite Song ~The Silver Siren~ is a Japanese light novel series—**One of the First Shoujo Light Novel Series Officially in English!**

Manga

Gleam

Story and Art by Aya Shirosaki

The small kingdom of Steliol is rife with the machinations of nobles and politics. Princess Salia, the 17-year-old daughter of the king, rules the country with the people's support. She is gifted with beauty, an

aptitude for politics, and has the blessing of her kingdom's god. She even dared to invade a neighboring country to stop a war—and succeeded.

Princess Salia is the definition of noblesse among her people, when in a sudden twist she decides to study abroad in Japan.

Will Salia's abrupt decision give her enemies the chance they seek to eliminate this princess for good? Those who seek to do her harm will have to contend with her royal bodyguard and the special agents assigned to protect her first.

Little Hero

Story and Art by Wakasa

Translation Charis Messier

One day after school fifth-grader Sawa is suddenly enveloped by a bright light, and moments later an unfamiliar landscape straight from a fantasy novel stretches out before her. With no way to return to Earth, she's forced to accept the role of the "Dawn Hero" and save the world from being devoured by the Witch's mist.

Sawa quickly learns no one goes by their name in this new world—only by their role in life. From then onward, she is known only as Hero. She is accompanied by Servant, Dagger, and Lady Knight on her adventure to fulfill her role as the hero who will save the world! Will this little hero be able to live up to the role forced upon her? Will she ever return home?

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